The Black Mesa Incident

By: Super Chocolate Bear

Gordon Freeman started it. Adrian Shephard has been sent to finish it. And Barney Calhoun is just stuck in the middle.

Status: complete

Published: 2006-09-10

Updated: 2008-03-14

Words: 215709

Chapters: 38

Rated: Fiction T - Language: English - Genre: Drama/Adventure - Characters: Gordon F., A. Shephard - Reviews: 494 - Favs: 498 - Follows: 158

Original source: https://www.fanfiction.net/s/3147068/1/The-Black-Mesa-Incident

Exported with the assistance of FicHub.net

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Introduction
Prologue
Black Mesa Inbound
Anomalous Materials
Insecurity
Unforeseen Consequences
Opposing Force
Office Complex
Duty Calls
We've Got Hostiles
Captive Freight
Blast Pit
Focal Point
Power Up
On a Rail
Power Struggle
Apprehension
A Leap of Faith
Residue Processing
Welcome to Black Mesa
Questionable Ethics
We Are Pulling Out
Surface Tension
Missing in Action
Forget About Freeman
Friendly Fire
Lambda Core

We Are Not Alone
Crush Depth
Xen
Vicarious Reality
Pit Worm's Nest
Gonarch's Lair
Foxtrot Uniform
The Package
Interloper
Worlds Collide
Nihilanth
Epilogue

Prologue

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The Black Mesa Incident

Prologue

" *Congratulations on completing the Black Mesa Hazard course. You are now prepared for any and all situations that may arise in the course of your duties. Have a very safe and productive day."*

The rail tram came to a stop, and Gordon Freeman let out a breath of relief. He was always nervous when he took these courses, although the reason why always eluded him. By his count, he had completed the course seven times including this one, with new aspects of the course requiring that all scientists that handled hazardous materials to go through it again.

And again, and again, and again.

And, it seems, again.

The lights in the tunnel switched on, and Gordon squinted as they dazzled him slightly. A clapping noise distracted his attention to the platform next to the tram, and he smiled as he saw Barney Calhoun approaching him as he applauded.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, I present Gordon Freeman, the man of a thousand talents."

He stepped off the tram, smiling wearily. "Not quite."

"Are you kidding? I didn't know you could shoot so straight! No offence, but I'd always figured you for being about as accurate as Dr Kleiner."

Gordon frowned. "Um… thank you?"

Barney laughed. "Don't mention it." He guided his scientist friend away from the tram. He wasn't wearing his customary helmet and body armour vest, which meant he had come here out of his own free time. They stepped into an elevator, and Barney pressed the button to go up a level.

"To be honest, I'm a little bit disturbed that we're being given weapons training at such short notice," Gordon said, a frown creasing his brow.

"Why? The way I see it, you're better prepared for… whatever might happen, y'know?"

"But that's my point. What do they think is going to happen that I'll need to know how to use a machine gun?"

The security officer shrugged. "Don't know. But hey. Now's not the time for worrying about that kinda stuff." He thought for a moment. "Tell you what. I'll give you a few minutes to get out of that fancy HEV suit of yours, and then I'll buy you that beer I'm always promising."

Gordon gave him a disbelieving look. "Right."

"No, really this time. I have the money and everything."

"Right."

"Gordon. I *will* buy you a beer."

"And I believe you."

The security officer grumbled something under his breath. "Fine, be that way. But believe it or not, I *am* going to buy you that beer tonight."

Gordon looked idly out the window as the train slowed a halt in front of a lowering bridge, two scientists waiting impatiently to cross on one side.

"You okay, Gordon?"

He looked over at Barney, who was sat beside him.

"Hm?"

"I said, are you okay? You seem kinda… distracted."

"Just thinking."

"About anything in particular?"

He shrugged. "Just some strange things going on."

Barney frowned. "Like what?"

The brown haired scientist paused before continuing, choosing his words carefully. Barney was a confirmed conspiracy nut, and if Gordon said anything even slightly suspicious, chances were Barney would jump to the worst conclusion and worry for the rest of the week. Sometimes Gordon wondered why Barney would accept a position working in a top secret science laboratory if these things worried him so much.

Not that Gordon was complaining. If he hadn't come here, they would never have met, and Gordon wouldn't have one of the best friends he could remember.

"Dr Kleiner got called to the Administrator's office yesterday, and he came back furious."

A wry smile crossed Barney's face. "Dr Kleiner? Furious? What'd Breen say to him?"

"Something about the experiment scheduled for Monday."

The bridge folded up, and the train continued on its way. Barney frowned as he thought for a moment.

"Monday, Monday… aren't you in the test chamber that day?"

Gordon nodded silently.

"No wonder you're worried. You think they're doing anything dangerous?"

"With this sudden insurgence of new training courses… it's possible. But," he added quickly, seeing the creeping look of horror on Barney's face, "Let's not jump to any conclusions. Dr Kleiner and Eli argue with the Administrator all the time. It's nothing new."

"I guess…"

He wasn't convinced. But Gordon was too tired to try, not that he could if he had wanted to.

"I still can't believe how well you did on that course, though. You got the highest score out of all the guys in your division, didn't you?"

Gordon shrugged. "Eli did well too."

"Oh, would you stop with the modest crap? Not that it matters. Once I've bought you that beer, you'll be bragging to the stars about how great you did."

He rubbed his eyes beneath his thick rimmed glasses. Why he hadn't invested in contacts not only baffled those who knew him, but it was also an enigma to Gordon as well. He had been planning on it ever since he was recruited into the Black Mesa research program, but had been too busy to attend to it.

"Barney… could we do this tomorrow? I'm pretty tired after the hazard course."

"'Course. I'll see if Rodriguez is up for a rematch on the air hockey table."

The train came to a stop, and Gordon pushed himself to his feet. "Just don't lose all of your money."

"I know, I know, I still owe you the beer. I won't forget."

Gordon walked at a slow, leisurely pace. It was amazing what a good nights' sleep could do for ones' disposition. It was Saturday, and as such, he was off work and free to roam the leisure facilities of Black Mesa. His first stop had been the gym. Although he preferred jogging in the open air, there were few places above ground near Black Mesa that lasted long enough for a satisfying run without clearance being needed. And so, to the gym it had been.

He was one of the few scientists who worked at Black Mesa who even bothered with the place. Eli would occasionally join him, but he was busier and busier with baby Alyx since his wife Azian had been promoted to head of Sector H activities. Gordon still smiled at the memory of Eli's slightly indignant look when he realised his wife outranked him.

The others who used the gym were security officers, most of whom just lifted weights. Gordon didn't really do that much. Running just came easier to him, since he had been in a track team all through high school.

After that, he had gone to the sector C cafeteria, where he had run into a slightly hung over Barney, whose only response to his greeting was a mono-syllabic grunt as he headed off to his first shift. Gordon felt a little bit happier that he hadn't agreed to go with Barney the night previous. A few drinks were his limit, and he was comfortable with that.

He sat down with a newspaper, a cup of coffee and a bagel, deciding to eat light. He just wasn't in the mood for a feast today. Gordon idly

flipped through the paper and came across the rumours section, which seemed to indicate that there was an increasing military presence in the area.

Of course, it was just a rumour. Why would the military be fortifying positions around the facility?

"Don't tell me you're falling for those things as well."

Gordon looked up and saw Dr Eli Vance standing next to him, tray in his hands. Gordon smiled.

"I haven't been listening to Barney for that long, no." He gestured to a seat around the table. "Please, have a seat. You're making me feel awkward, just standing there."

Eli slid into the chair and dug into his bacon and scrambled eggs. He always did have a healthy appetite. He waited until he had chewed and swallowed before he spoke.

"Sorry. I've been kind of feeling on edge for the past few days."

"Dr Kleiner's meeting with the Administrator?"

Eli nodded. "Izzy hasn't stopped talking about it since it happened, and I can understand why."

"Anything you can tell me about?"

The dark skinned scientist paused. "Sorry, Gordon. I was already breaking the rules when I told you about the meeting in the first place."

Gordon tried to hide his frown. He hadn't known it was supposed to be kept secret. Hopefully Barney wouldn't let anything slip to his colleagues. They mostly dismissed or ignored him when he started talking about conspiracy theories anyway.

"Well… is there anything you *can* tell me?"

"I *can* tell you it's to do with the sample we're using on Monday. Since you're the one who's going to be in the middle of it, I figured you should know that much."

"Thanks."

"Speaking of which, I've got some formulae to run past you, if you're free later."

Gordon took a sip of his coffee, and thought for a moment. "Dr Kleiner wants to run through some new hazard containment protocols with me today, but I'm free after, say… three o'clock?"

Eli smiled and nodded. "Yeah, that'll do nicely. In fact, come over about six, and I'll have Azian whip us up some dinner."

"Are you sure she won't mind? It *is* quite short notice, after all, and-"

He waved a dismissive hand. "Of *course* she won't mind. Just leave it to me." He winked. "I'll talk her into it."

Gordon smiled, nodded, and took a bite of his bagel. Having seen Azian's temper up close and personal, he wasn't so sure of Eli's abilities. But, if he had some kind of death wish, Gordon wasn't about to intervene.

The announcement channel chimed twice, and the usual low mechanical voice emerged.

" *Dr Freeman. Report to Dr Kleiner's office immediately."*

Eli looked up expectantly. "Is that your appointment?"

"As far as I know, it's not for another two hours," Gordon replied, confused. He shrugged. "I suppose Dr Kleiner's busier than I thought."

Eli smiled and shook his head. "I think you can call him Isaac, Gordon. You *have* known him the longest out of all of us."

Gordon shrugged. "He was my teacher. Old habits die hard."

"Don't I know it."

Gordon lightly ran around the corner and found Dr Kleiner looking through the window of his office, his hands cupped over his eyes. Barney was stood behind him, looking considerably better than he had in the cafeteria, his arms crossed and his foot tapping. He noticed Gordon entering the corridor and smiled.

"There y'are. Dr Kleiner, he's here."

Kleiner looked up from his bent over position, a kind smile spreading across his features as he saw Gordon.

"Ah, Gordon. It appears I've locked myself out of my office again. It seems I left both my usual key card and my spare in the office, and put the door on auto lock."

Barney smiled cockily at Gordon. "I figured you might want another race. Maybe you can owe *me* a beer this time."

"Which you still haven't given me yet."

"I said I would, and I will," he replied, his voice going up a defensive octave.

Dr Kleiner cleared his throat and scratched the side of his head. "Excuse me, gentlemen, but…"

The security officer put up his hands in mock surrender. "Okay, doc." He turned to Gordon. "You ready?"

He nodded.

"Three… two… one… go!"

Barney raced down the corridor and around the corner, heading for the security office where the skeleton key card was kept.

Gordon and Kleiner exchanged an amused smile before he crouched and opened an air vent directly next to the office door. He crawled inside and wriggled through, months of practice ensuring that he didn't make a sound. As he crawled, Gordon heard Dr Kleiner's voice echoing down the vent.

"You know, you really should tell him about this at some point, Gordon. He's running himself ragged every time."

"He'll figure it out eventually," he replied, pushing open the grate inside Kleiner's office. He got up and walked over to the desk, picked up one of the key cards, and opened the door.

Kleiner made his way inside. "But really, Gordon, it takes him ten minutes to run there and back. I'm not sure it's good for him. He doesn't get as much exercise as he should, you know." He sat down at his desk and began sorting through various papers. "Well, as long as you're here," he sighed, gesturing to the chair opposite the desk, "we might as well go through those hazard procedures before my eleven o'clock arrives."

Gordon nodded wearily and sat down, having to move some stacked books and various papers before he could do so.

"Now, this is the-"

"Aw, dammit!"

The two turned to see a breathless Barney stood in the doorway, a skeleton key card in his hand. "I had a new one made and put it closer to his office so I could win this! How the hell did you get in here so fa-?"

He paused as he noticed the dislodged grate lying on the ground, which Gordon had forgotten to re-attach.

Barney let out an exasperated sigh and let his head hang. "I'm a freaking security officer. How did I miss *that* the ten million times we've done this?"

Kleiner seemed to seriously consider the question. "Low attention span, perhaps?" he asked innocently, not meaning it as an insult.

"Oh, ha, ha. I still only owe you one beer, Gordon."

And with that declaration, the security officer turned on his heel and walked away. The two scientists watch the door close, and then turned back to each other.

"Now, let's get back to work, shall we?"

Eli walked over to the kitchen door, gesturing for Gordon to take a seat.

"We'll get to work once we've had dinner."

"Are you *sure* this is all right?"

"Stop worrying. Azian's fine with it."

An indignant 'ha' came from the kitchen, and Eli put on a forced smile and turned to go inside. He stopped himself in the doorway.

"Oh, Gordon - would you mind keeping an eye on Alyx in the living room while we get dinner ready?"

Azian's voice once again emerged from the kitchen, though this time much louder. "'We'?"

Eli turned and went inside. "Honey, what I *meant* was…"

Trying to ignore the argument going on in the kitchen, Gordon made his way into the living room, feeling slightly nervous, though not knowing why. He didn't really have much experience with babies,

having only had contact with his nephew, whose picture he had in his locker. He wasn't sure if baby girls or baby boys were any different in her behaviour, or if they had different requirements, or…

He took a breath.

Calm down, Freeman. You're just watching her, not adopting her.

In the living room, two year old Alyx Vance was sat on the floor, playing with some blocks. She looked up at Gordon as he entered the room, pure wonder on her face.

Unsure of what to do, Gordon elected to sit down cross legged next to her, remembering hearing something about children liking being treated like equals, or something along those lines. And since he wasn't aiming at being an authority figure in her life any time soon, he didn't see the harm.

She crawled over to him, her curiosity over this strange thing sat in front of her overriding any caution. A chubby hand reached out and grasped his finger.

Now Gordon *really* didn't know what to do.

The door to the living room opened behind him.

"Would you look at that…"

Gordon glanced over his shoulder at Eli, who was stood with his arms crossed, an impressed look on his face.

"What?"

"It's strange. That girl has damn near hated everyone she came across, and then you sit down and *poof* . Like a newborn puppy."

He looked down at the child in front of him, Alyx's eyes looking into his. It was a very odd experience, feeling like one was being judged by a baby.

"I must not look very threatening."

Eli let out a small chuckle. "Anyway," he said, hefting Alyx up into his arms. "It's time for dinner, little lady, so…"

Gordon got to his feet and followed Eli through to the dining room. He always enjoyed coming to Eli's quarters; the entire place seemed like a mansion compared to his modest accommodations.

He sat down at the table, taking in the smell of the food on the table. It was some Malaysian dish he was unfamiliar with, but he had to admit it smelled delicious, especially considering his diet usually consisted of what a college student would usually consume. After waiting for everyone else to get seated and comfortable, Gordon began eating. As expected, it was delicious.

"So, Gordon," Azian began between sips of her water, "how are you? I haven't talked to you since… last month, was it?"

He shrugged. "More of the same. Nothing really changes much down here." He nodded at her. "And you?"

With her eyes closed, she nodded her head. "Those are pretty much my sentiments as well. Although, work in Sector H has been getting quite hectic recently, what with-" she stopped herself in mid sentence. "Well, you'll be finding out on Monday." She waited for Gordon to swallow some of the food he was chewing before talking again. "What about… Gina, is it? How is she?"

Eli suddenly looked quite embarrassed, and Gordon felt equally awkward. "Um… we… it didn't work out."

"Oh? Why not?"

"We weren't right for each other, I suppose. You'd have to ask her about it," he said, without one iota of bitterness in his voice. He actually didn't mind that much, and when he thought on it, it was probably that apathy that drove Gina away.

Noticing the look on Eli's face, Azian scrutinised Gordon. "And how long ago was this?"

His green eyes went wide beneath his glasses. He tried to avoid glancing at Eli as he spoke. "Oh, very recent. Very recent indeed."

Her glare intensified.

"Three weeks."

"Three weeks? And you didn't think I would want to know about this?" Azian said, looking at Eli.

"Well, it's his business, I didn't think… I, uh… um… sorry."

Gordon took another bite of his food, and Alyx chortled away happily, smearing sauce on her face. He sighed inwardly.

Ah, to live the simple life…

"See you on Monday, Gordon. We'll have to do this again sometime."

"Maybe with some warning this time, hmm?" Azian added, readjusting her grip on Alyx. Her face softened into a warm smile. "It was nice to see you, Gordon. Eli's right; do visit again. Alyx seems to have taken real a shine to you."

As if to accentuate the point, Alyx reached towards Gordon, grunting with the effort.

Gordon just smiled and nodded, not sure how to take such adulation from a baby. He reached out and grasped Alyx's small hand with this thumb and forefinger, shaking it gently.

"Uh… nice to see you again."

Both Eli and Azian burst out laughing. Eli shook his head. "I'll see you on Monday, Gordon."

"Right. See you then."

He turned and left, hands in his pockets as he headed for the train station. He passed a few scientists who had been burning the midnight oil on some project or another, but none that he recognised. Three drunken security guards stumbled past as he entered the train station, the middle one looking worse for wear as his two comrades struggled to carry his stumbling and happy form away.

Gordon sat down and waited for his train, idly picking up a copy of the *Black Mesa Times* and flicking through it while he did so.

A strange feeling crept up the back of his neck as he read, and he slowly lowered the newspaper to see a train passing through the station carrying Administrator Breen. Although he was sure Breen recognised him, Gordon didn't see any indication of a greeting. Breen just sat in his chair, tapping his knee with his hand nervously, his carefully trimmed white hair and beard shining slightly in the dim light. The train disappeared out of sight around the corner.

Gordon frowned. Why was Breen on that train? His quarters and office were in the nigh on opposite direction, and that train route in no way lead to the Sector C test labs. And with such a big experiment coming up… was this what his conversation with Dr Kleiner was about?

His train arrived in the station.

Gordon slowly made his way in, beginning to think that perhaps there was more to Barney's wild conspiracy theories than he had thought.

Much more.

(A/N: Yes, *another* attempt at a *Half Life* adaptation. I'm hoping that mine will be a bit different from those I've seen around this section. I was toying with the idea of incorporating Adrian Shephard from

Opposing Force, but having read other stories that deal with our favourite Corporal, I think I might leave it in their much more talented hands.

Also, I was going to have this from two points of view, Gordon and Barney (so I can cover both *Half Life* and *Blue Shift* in the same story), but now I'm debating whether or not to just leave it exclusively in Gordon's, seeing as Barney's adventure is pretty much a side story, and not really vital to the overall thing.

So, let me hear you thoughts. Do you want Barney's POV from *Blue Shift* in here as well? Heck, do you want *three* POV's, with Shephard included?

Review, and tell me what you think.)

Black Mesa Inbound

Disclaimer: I don't own *Half Life.*

The Black Mesa Incident

Chapter Two: Black Mesa Inbound

The alarm clock shattered any peaceful slumber that once held Gordon. He grumbled something uncomplimentary as he fumbled for the button to turn it off. Coming up empty, he resolved to hit the snooze button instead.

With a grunt of effort, he levered himself up into a sitting position, trying to ignore the slightly bitter early morning taste in his mouth. He swung his legs out from under the bed, rubbing his eyes. A frown creased his brow as he looked at the clock with blurry vision. While the numbers were distorted, it looked like it said…

He shook his head and grabbed his glasses from beside the alarm clock. Green eyes widened as his vision cleared and he actually saw the time. A silent curse on his lips, he sprinted to the bathroom, aiming to quickly brush his teeth and leave. He would have to forego a shower for now; it's not like the experiment should take *too* long, after all. He could always come back afterwards.

As he looked at himself in the mirror, he took a (very brief) moment to look at his goatee beard, remembering how he had thought about shaving it off. While Barney had joked it was the only way he could tell Gordon apart from the other scientists, Gordon himself had never been too fond of it. It had seemed like an interesting idea at the time (a year or so ago, he couldn't quite remember), and he simply hadn't gotten around to removing it once it started irritating him.

He sighed and got to brushing his teeth, resolving to add it to the list of things he would do when he returned from the experiment.

A few short minutes later, Gordon was sprinting out into the train station, which was, as usual, empty. At this time of day, everybody was either hard at work or taking the day off for some reason or another.

They weren't being absent minded MIT graduates who couldn't even use an alarm clock right.

Another sigh escaped his lips as he readjusted his tie, which was entirely too tight around his neck. He heard the sound of a train approaching and went to the edge of the platform, hoping that, for once, they were running early. By his watch, he would already be half an hour late by the time his train got him to the Sector C test labs.

A voice coming from the train shattered his hopes.

"Hey, Gordon!"

Barney grinned and waved from inside the train.

"Late again? I'm shocked, Gordon! Shocked!"

Gordon very much wanted to flip him the bird, but settled for a sarcastic smile and a very small wave. The security guard laughed, shook his head, and turned forward to look to his destination.

Fortunately, Gordon's train was immediately after, and all too slowly came to a halt in front of the platform and opened its door.

Gordon wasn't sure why they were called trains; if anything, they were a single automated train *carriage* . Not to mention the fact that they ran on thing magnetic tracks that were suspended *above* the train as well as below. While that had made Gordon rather wary of them when he had first arrived at Black Mesa, he had soon realised that they were perfectly safe to use.

Barney, on the other hand, still stayed well away from the windows, which had no glass in them to this day.

In the distance, Gordon saw Barney disembark from his train, and when it began moving of its' own accord, so did Gordons'.

Slowly, he came up behind Barneys' platform, the aforementioned security guard impatiently slamming his fist on the unopened door there. He looked back at Gordon in a very annoyed manner.

Gordon just smiled. "I'm shocked, Barney. Shocked," he mouthed, prompting a 'ha ha' look from Barney before he returned to his knocking.

The automated voiceover for the train began to speak, although Gordon really wished it wouldn't. He, and all the other employees of the Black Mesa Research facility, had heard it every time they went to work, and every time they came back. The only difference was towards the end when current events of the day were being listed off. Gordon seemed to remember there being a decathlon tonight, but he couldn't remember what time. He made a mental note to listen for it.

" *Good morning, and welcome to the Black Mesa Transit System. This automated train is provided for the security and convenience of the Black Mesa Research Facility personnel. The time is eight-forty seven A.M. Current topside temperature is ninety-three degrees with an estimated high of one hundred and five. The Black Mesa compound is maintained at a pleasant sixty-eight degrees at all times…"*

"… *A reminder to all Black Mesa personnel: Regular radiation and biohazard screenings are a requirement of continued employment in the Black Mesa Research Facility. Missing a scheduled urinalysis or radiation check-up is grounds for immediate termination."*

The train stopped at an unscheduled point, and Gordon looked about, slightly nervous at the delay. He was already close to being

half an hour late. Gordon looked down at his watch.

Scratch that, he *was* half and hour late.

There had been a spill of toxic waste below him. A large yellow carrier robot was blocking the path of the train as it attempted to move some of the toxic waste containers out of the way. Its' insect-like appearance reflected the luminescent green of the toxic liquid, giving it an almost polished shine.

A strange feeling travelled up the back of Gordon's neck, and he looked around, feeling as though he were being watched.

Green eyes scanned the large chamber and settled on another train that was suspended next to his, heading in the opposite direction and stuck just as he was. There were two people inside. One was a non-descript scientist, who was in the process of irritably battling some kind of stain on his lab coat.On the scientists' right was a man who… who…

" *If you feel you have been exposed to radioactive or other hazardous materials in the course of your duties, contact your radiation safety officer immediately. Work safe. Work smart. Your future depends…"*

The voice faded away as Gordon saw *him* . His skin was deathly pale and sunken in, the bags under his eyes given an almost exaggerated effect from the combination of shadows and bright green light playing across his face. He didn't seem to notice Gordon, remaining deathly still as he stared blankly forward. A well tailored navy suit clashed with the purple tie neatly knotted around his neck, but he didn't seem to care in the least. Idly, he brushed something from his jacket.

The train began to move again, the yellow robot having moved the hazardous waste out of the way.

But Gordon still couldn't take his eyes off the ghostly apparition of a man. His train continued down into a tunnel until Gordon lost all sight of him. He slowly sat back down, his ears tuning back in to what the neutral and brainless voice was telling him.

" *Now arriving at Sector C Test Labs and Control Facilities."*

Gordon sighed in relief as the train slowly came to a halt next to the platform. A part of him hoped that no-one would notice that he was half an hour late, and as such had postponed a highly important experiment, if not *the* most important experiment he had taken part in so far.

" *Please stand back from the automated door and wait for the security officer to verify your identity. Before exiting the train, be sure to check your area for personal belongings. Thank you, and have a very safe and productive day."*

The security officer, who Gordon remembered from the duty roster as Simon Bennet, made his way over to the train and stopped at the door.

"Mornin', Mr Freeman. Looks like you're runnin' late."

Gordon bit back his rude (and at this point, instinctive) response, and simply waited for the security guard to punch in his security code and open the door. He did so, and the door slid open. Gordon tried not to seem too rude as he made his way past the guard and across the platform to the reinforced metal door that led to the Anomalous Materials Lab.

Looking more than a little dissatisfied with the lack of conversation on Gordon's part (Gordon was usually one of the more friendly scientists), Bennet made his way over to the control panel next to the door and punched in his code.

The two thick metal bars at the top and bottom of the door slid aside with a loud series of clanging and grinding noises. The door quietly

opened shortly after, splitting in the middle and sending the two halves up and down, respectively.

Gordon gave Bennet a courteous nod and an apologetic smile, heading into the airlock-esque corridor before him.

The door closed behind him, and Gordon prepared to enter the Sector C test labs.

(A/N: Not much to say, except… review! Or review it with the next chapter, it doesn't really matter.)

Anomalous Materials

Disclaimer: I don't own *Half-Life.*

The Black Mesa Incident

Chapter Three: Anomalous Materials

The giant metal doors closed together behind him with a loud clang that went unnoticed by the occupants of the reception area. Gordon walked over to the desk that stood in the middle of the room, where a security guard was typing away on a computer, checking a nearby book as a reference every now and again. Behind him stood a scientist that Gordon wasn't too familiar with, but had seen around the lab. He was shaking his head and pointing things out on the screen and the book that the guard apparently missed, and correcting him accordingly.

The guard, whose badge named him as Rossman, glanced up in Gordon's direction as he came to a stop in front of the desk.

"Hey, Mr Freeman. I had a bunch of messages for ya, but we had a system crash about twenty minutes ago and I'm still trying to find my files." Rossman rubbed his eyes wearily. "Just one of those days, I guess."

Gordon gave him a sympathetic smile. The guard looked through a few papers that were on his desk beside the computer DIY book.

"They were having some problems down in the test chamber too, but I think that's all straightened out." He found the piece of paper he was looking for and handed it over to Gordon. "They said for you to head down there as soon as you got into your hazard suit."

Gordon nodded as he took the sheet of paper. "Right."

"And… would you mind taking this," he said, handing over another piece of paper, "to the theory office on your way down? I'd take care of it myself, but I'm kinda swamped here."

"No problem." Gordon replied without second thought. He was already late, what more could they do?

"You're one in a million, doc. Have a good one."

After another quick summary of the room, Gordon turned and made his way down the corridor that linked directly onto the reception area. Although he had been here many times since he came under the employ of the Black Mesa Research Facility, he was still grateful for the colour coded directions that were painted on the walls. It certainly made things easier for some of the more… absent minded scientists.

He exchanged a few nods and greetings with various co-workers along the way, most of whom he knew only as colleagues. Eli was working in the lower levels at the moment with Dr Kleiner… and that was about it. True, Magnusson was busy taking readings somewhere, but Gordon wasn't too concerned about him.

The piece of paper that the guard had given him was about exactly what he would be doing in the experiment. Start the rotors, wait for the anti-mass-spectrometer to reach one hundred and five percent, insert the carrier into the beam… it was all the same thing. After a pause, he looked over the figures again.

One hundred five percent?

That was a bit excessive. Of course, that all depended on the purity of the sample.

Gordon walked to the door of the theory office and pushed the 'open' button, waiting for it to slide aside fully before going in. The scientists inside were all gathered around an old fashioned whiteboard, complicated quadratic equations and diagrams scribbled all over its'

surface in colours from all over the rainbow. They barely even noticed him when he came in.

"Dr Stevenson?" he enquired slowly, holding up the piece of paper.

One of the scientists, with slicked back black hair and pale features, turned to look at him and made his way over.

"Yes, Freeman?"

"This was at the front desk for you."

He snatched it away from Gordon, looking almost suspicious of him and his motives. Beady black eyes looked it over.

"Yes… thank you, Freeman. Incidentally, shouldn't you have been in the test chamber half an hour ago?"

Gordon put up his hands in mock surrender. "Just trying to do a good deed, doctor."

Stevenson seemed to regret his words, and smiled apologetically. "Sorry. Stressful day."

As he left the office and made his way to the changing rooms, Gordon paused as he saw that someone else was in Breen's office. It was the same two people Gordon had seen on the tram earlier when his had been stopped by the toxic waste spill.

But… weren't they going the other way?

Even though the large windows were relatively soundproof, Gordon could still make out their muffled voices, though not their words. They were arguing vehemently about something, with fingers being pointed and arms slicing downwards through the air as they shook their heads. At least, that's what the scientist was doing. The man with the briefcase and suit didn't seem to be much offended by anything. Whatever the scientist yelled at him, he seemed to counter slowly and calmly.

Suddenly, he noticed Gordon looking at him and turned his head to stare directly at him. It was like being stared at by… Gordon couldn't think of a comparison. It haunted him.

The scientist followed his gaze and scowled at Gordon for seemingly eavesdropping. His arm sprang out, angrily pointing for Gordon to leave. Realising his rudeness, Gordon turned and continued on his way to the changing rooms, feeling the 'briefcase man's gaze on him the entire time.

It wasn't very crowded in the pale yellow room, with only one person currently occupying it. He had one foot up on one of the benches as he tied his shoelaces. Gordon hated him; he could never remember the man's name, yet he always seemed to know his, and always seemed incredibly happy to see him.

As expected, a grin spread across his lips beneath his bushy white moustache as he saw Gordon.

"Ah! Hello, Gordon Freeman. It's good to see you."

"Yes… hello… how are you?" He waved half heartedly as he made his way over to the locker, trying to look like he was in a hurry.

Well, technically he *was,* but still.

"Doing great, doing great."

Gordon took off his lab coat and hung it up on the open door of his locker, which stood a few inches taller than him. He hurriedly removed his tie, not bothering to undo it before he hung it up on the inside of the locker door.

"And you?"

Then the shoes and socks. He looked up at… nope, he still couldn't remember.

"I'm fine. A bit late, but…"

Off came the shirt.

"What are you going to do, huh?" the scientist with no name replied, bursting out with laughter.

Now the pants.

"Um… right," Gordon replied. He felt a bit awkward talking to the guy in just a t-shirt and boxers, and so after an entirely too quick wave, made his way to the HEV room. There were three glass booths on the other side of the room, two of them being empty. They must have been taken by Gina and her assistant. Gordon shook his head and pressed the release button for his HEV suit, banishing thoughts of his… ex… from his mind.

Well, technically, she wasn't his ex. They only went out for about two weeks; hardly long enough for them to qualify as a couple. And yet, everyone seemed to think that they were. Case in point being Eli's wave, Azian.

With a hiss, the glass tube rose up into the ceiling, and Gordon stepped up to the pedestal where the orange and black HEV suit was standing. He slipped into the bodysuit easily, feeling the computerised monitoring system shaping the suit to his body so that it felt comfortable and protective, but didn't cling to his skin or chafe. He looked down at his wrist and pushed the button shown there, inserting the needle that helped the suit to link to his nervous system. A quiet, tinny female voice sounded in his ears, only audible to him through the link the suit had created.

" *Welcome to the HEV Mark VI protective system. For use in hazardous environmental conditions."*

Various stats appeared in his peripheral vision in a pale orange font; not enough to distract him when he was working on something else, but not hard to see if he concentrated on them. The suits' extra shielding was at zero.

Not that he would need it. Gordon didn't expect the experiment to last more than an hour at the most. The extra shielding was only required if he was going to be in hazardous conditions for a day or so, or unless he would be handling materials that were particularly toxic. He made his way out and through the changing room, hoping the cheerful scientist had decided to move on.

"Hey! Looking sharp there, Gordon!"

"Thanks there, um… you," he said at the door, not waiting for it to slide fully open before making his way out and down the corridor, heading for the elevator that would take him into the bowels of the Sector C test labs.

The door to the test chamber control office opened, and Gordon stepped through, trying not to look too guilty in front of his colleagues. After all, there had been a system crash twenty minutes ago, so for all they knew, that could have been the cause of his lateness.

"Ah, Gordon. There you are," Dr Phelps said, as if nothing was wrong whatsoever. In fact, all three of the scientists stood before him didn't seem to mind his lateness. When Gordon thought about it, he realised that they probably didn't notice.

Phelps continued. "We've just sent the sample down the test chamber."

Bennet nodded, his wild white curly hair going with it. "We've boosted the anti-mass-spectrometer one hundred and five percent."

"I know," Gordon said, a grim look crossing his features. "Are you sure we need it?"

"It's a bit of a gamble, but we need the extra resolution," Bennet replied, shrugging.

Then it was McFarly's turn. "The administrator's very insistent that we get a reading from this latest sample. I gather they went to some lengths to get it."

Gordon nodded, now understanding why Kleiner and Breen had argued, and why Kleiner had been reassigned to another sector during the experiment. The sample had been difficult to obtain, but was obviously of some greater value than the ones that were usually experimented on. And was a much riskier sample, to boot. So Kleiner had been sent away in order to stop any interference on his part.

But… why was Breen so hell bent on using this particular sample?

"They're waiting for you, Gordon. In the test chamber," Phelps said, the impatience in his voice apparent.

He nodded and made his way over to the door on the other side of the room, where a retinal scanner was attached next to it. McFarly but his eyes to the designated lens and held it there as the scanner beeped in confirmation. The door obligingly slid open, and Gordon stepped through, heading into the next room.

There, on the other side of the hallway was Eli, conversing with Dr Kleiner, an equally grim look on his face. Their expressions lightened slightly as they saw Gordon approaching, but still not much. Now Gordon knew why.

Suddenly, a control panel on the other side of the room exploded.

"It's about to go critical!" Kleiner said, and the two sprinted over to the panel.

Eli feverishly tapped away at different controls before his shoulders slumped and he wiped his brow nervously.

"What the hell is going on with our equipment?" Eli mused, stroking his chin.

"It wasn't meant to do this in the first place," Kleiner replied, worried.

"Anything I need to worry about?" Gordon asked, making his way over. Eli sighed, his hands on his hips.

"Let me put it this way, Gordon: there's nothing much either of us can do about it anymore."

Gordon didn't like the finality in that statement.

"I'll… see you later, all right?"

Eli didn't look so sure. "… right."

Gordon turned and made his way to the elevator and made his way further down.

There was something about the airlock that day that made it seem different than the many times Gordon had been in it before. Perhaps it was the extenuating circumstances that led to the equipment being pushed to levels that it really shouldn't be. Perhaps there was a malfunction with the suits' environmental systems.

Or maybe, just maybe, it was impending sense of doom Gordon felt when Bryce and Philips started talking to him before letting him into the test chamber. They rarely did that.

"I'm afraid we'll be deviating slightly from standard test analysis procedures today, Gordon."

Bryce rolled his eyes. "Yes, but with *good reason* . This is a rare opportunity for us; this is the purest sample we've seen yet."

"And, potentially, the most unstable," Philips muttered, crossing his arms.

His companion gave Gordon a smile. "Now, now, if you follow standard insertion procedures, everything should be fine."

Philips whipped his head around to look at him. "I don't know how you can say that. Although, I will admit that the possibility of a resonance cascade his extremely unlikely-"

"Gordon doesn't need to hear all this, he's a highly trained professional. We have assured the administrator that *nothing will go wrong…?"* he said warningly.

Philips avoided Bryce's gaze. "Ah… yes… you're right." He looked at Gordon apologetically. "Gordon, we have complete confidence in you."

After leaving a lingering gaze on Philips, Bryce made his way over to the retinal scanner on one side of the room. "All right. Go ahead," he said to Gordon, nodding for him to wait at the airlock door.

"Let's let him in now," he said gently, as though appeasing a child. Philips made his way over to the scanner on the opposite side.

Beeps sounded from both scanners, and the airlock door slid open with a clang, much faster than the entrance to the Anomalous Materials lab earlier. Gordon stepped into the immense orange chamber and heard the doors clang shut behind him as he made his way over to a ladder on the other side of the room.

It never ceased to amaze him just how huge the test chamber machinery was; a hole in the ground in the center of the chamber (which itself was shaped like an upright cylinder) was surrounded by a metal frame, with three almost claw like arms sprouting from the sides. In the center of the circle in the ground was a focusing lens which allowed fantastic resolution of the crystalline samples that they would commonly scan.

Gordon still didn't know where the samples came from, and any questions were quickly shot down as being classified or 'above his head'. Some of his colleagues had even given him badly disguised warnings about asking too many questions, and although Gordon didn't admire their talent for subtlety, he understood the message

and let it be. The way he saw it, he would eventually be promoted into a position where he would be privy to such information. And, if he was anything, Gordon Freeman was a patient man.

Above his head was the apparatus that performed the scanning itself. The machine pointed downwards at the pit in the middle of the chamber almost looked like a laser cannon, with a large yellow lens on the tip matching the hue of the focusing lens that was imbedded in the ground. Three small angular cylindrical shapes were held aloft next to the lens of the 'cannon'.

The noise of a microphone being tuned came over the large speakers of the chamber.

Philips cleared his throat, his slightly nasal voice evident even through his grunting.

" *Testing… testing… well, everything seems to be in order."*

Bryce's voice came over next.

" *All right Gordon, your suit should keep you comfortable through all of this. The sample should be delivered up to you in a few moments. If you would be so kind as to climb up and start the rotors, we'll break the anti-mass-spectrometer at one hundred five percent, and hold it there until the carrier arrives."*

Gordon climbed up the ladder leading up to an overhead platform. He made his way over to the keyboard and red box that was on the other side of the gantry, and typed in his clearance code. The red box lifted up, revealing a simple push switch. Gordon flipped it on and made his way back down.

" *Very good…"* Bryce said absent-mindedly. *"We'll take it from here."*

" *Power to stage one emitters… activating… now,"* Philips announced, although it was hardly for Gordon's benefit.

A shaft of light shot out of the 'cannon', focusing on the much smaller lens below.

" *Power to stage two emitters… activating… now."*

The cylinders began rotating around the 'cannon', blue bolts of electricity emitting into it.

" *Stage three emitters… activating… now."*

Golden electricity shot out from the under side of the cylinders as they made their way around the 'cannon', making contact with the small focusing lens at the bottom of the central pit.

" *Systems operating at one-oh-five percent."*

Bryce's deeper voice once again came over the speaker system. *"Gordon, we have no idea how long the systems can operate at this level, nor how long the readings will take. Please, work as quickly as you can."*

Philips came on again. *"Sustaining sequence."* He paused for a moment. *"Uh, it's probably not a problem… probably… but I'm showing a slight discrepancy in… well, no, it's well within acceptable bounds again. Sustaining sequence."*

Gordon *really* didn't like the sound of that.

Small red lights began flashing on the carrier system elevator, which was surrounded by metal grating to prevent anyone falling down the not inconsiderably deep shaft below.

" *I've just been informed that the sample should be making its' way up to you any moment now,"* Bryce said, however unnecessarily.

Gordon made his way over as the grating lowered down, revealing the sample that, as Barney would say, everyone was getting into such a tizzy about. It was certainly the largest crystal sample that Gordon had seen, and the fact that it was so pure that he could

almost see straight through it astounded Gordon. It was definitely breathtaking. As usual, it was attached to the end of a sample buggy, which Gordon merely had to push forward into the path of the beam.

He stepped behind it and gripped the handles tightly, feeling somewhat reluctant to take part in an experiment that could no doubt cause quite a bit of trouble.

" *Gordon, please insert the specimen,"* Bryce said, somewhat impatiently.

Gordon shook his head and pushed the buggy forward, feeling foolish for being so worried.

He pushed the crystal into the path of the beam.

And then all hell broke loose.

Bright green energy burst from the center of the pit, and electricity of the same hue shot out across the chamber. Bryce and Philips panicked over the speakers.

" *Gordon! Get away from the beam-"*

" *Shutting down… attempting shut down-"*

" *No-"*

" *It's not working, it's not… it's not-"*

All Gordon could hear were screams as the green electricity shot forth out of the machinery above Gordon's head, striking the control room, the airlock, and everything in between. Gordon ran forward and grasped the buggy by the handles, attempting to pull it out of the pit. As he did so, he noticed a tendril of green energy attached to the crystal coming from the epicentre of the reaction, pulling it back in.

It flew back towards the reaction like a slingshot, and Gordon fell back, having lost his grip and his footing.

Gordon covered his eyes with his arm as an unbearably bright green light filled his vision, blinding him.

Suddenly, he was somewhere else.

He looked down to find he was up to his ankles in water (or what at least *looked* like water). Slowly, he brought his dazzled eyes up, and gasped as he saw the sky. It was a strange mix of dark greens and purples. As he looked around, he found he was in some kind of… ravine?

He couldn't think of the right words. He couldn't think of much of *anything* right now. Before him crouched two… animals. Animals that only had two legs, and yet were stood as though they had four. Animals that had long, alligator like tails and red tentacles coming from their heads where mouths should be. Gordon felt like he should have vomited, or run away, or *something.* But all he could do was sit there on the ground, paralysed by fear.

The green light blinded him again.

He was back in the test chamber. Relief flooded him, but quickly left him as he saw several pieces of the ceiling bearing down on him. He scrambled onto all fours and quickly moved away, narrowly missing the tank-sized pieces of the ceiling.

He heard a strange almost gurgling noise come from his left, and he looked over and saw some… *thing* stood there. Its' back was to him. Its'… skin was brown, and it stood on two legs, but its' back was hunched forward, with two skinny arms and small two clawed hands at the end of them. Gordon tried to back away slowly, but must have made some kind of noise that was audible over the sound of the roaring green energy, because it whirled around the face him.

Gordon's entire face went pale as he saw the creature in full. It had one large red eye surrounded by several smaller ones, while its' teeth seemed to be tucked under where a human's chin would be. There was no nose or ears to be found. A third arm protruded from

its' chest, seemingly dangling idly. Dark green braces were clamped around its' neck, wrists and ankles.

Almost as though they were… chains?

It rubbed its' two hands together and green electricity gathered around it, coming together into a small orb between the creatures' claw-like hands. It shoved its' hands forward, releasing the electricity at Gordon.

The same green light as before consumed him before the electricity could reach him.

Everything was dark.

All he could hear was his breathing.

…

Am I dead?

He heard a gurgling noise. Fear shot up through his spine as he slowly turned around and came face to… face with not one, but *four* of the creatures like the one he had seen in the test chamber.

This time, he took action, and began to back away from them slowly, preparing himself to turn and run in case they decided to electrocute him as well.

But they didn't. They simply stared at him. But it wasn't out of curiosity.

It was almost as if they were… expecting him…

Air rushed back to his ears as though he were coming up from water, and he was once again blinded by green energy.

Gordon could only wonder where he was going now.

(A/N: And so it begins…

Not much to add, except… review!

Next chapter: Insecurity)

Insecurity

Disclaimer: I don't own *Half-Life.*

The Black Mesa Incident

Chapter Four: Insecurity

Barney sighed as he saw Gordon's tram go around the corner. He returned his attention to the door. He waited for a few seconds with his ear to the locked entrance before he resumed slamming his fist on it. Since all the doors in the Black Mesa facility were made of reinforced materials that Barney couldn't even begin to understand, normal knocking wasn't likely to catch anyone's attention soon.

He tried once again to get the laser scanner next to the door to recognise his pass ID badge.

No response.

With a low growl, Barney kicked the door. He jumped when a muffled voice came from the other side.

"Hold on a minute. The door's not recognising your pass ID. Let me see if I can get it open on this side."

He recognised the voice as Richards. Beeping came from the other side as he tried to open the doors. With a smile, Barney banged on the door again a few times.

Richards seemed oblivious to the noise. "Okay. I think I got it."

The door slid open obligingly, and Barney stepped through, a 'what the hell is going on?' ready on his lips. Richards sighed out a weary explanation before he had the chance.

"Sorry about that, Calhoun. The whole facility's been having trouble this mornin'. System crashes, equipment failures… it's a wonder the whole place hasn't shut down yet."

Barney tilted his head to the side. "Long shift?"

The security guard nodded and rubbed his eyes. "These things've been drivin' us crazy down here. And that's not to mention how… *nicely* the big brains are takin' it."

"Oh, well as long as they're blaming it on the right people."

Richards nodded and smiled wryly. "Oh yeah. They can't get their coffee with two sugars from the dispenser, so *obviously* it's a security problem."

Barney shrugged sympathetically. "Hey, your shift can only last so long, right?"

"Right. Some of the guys are goin' to Benicia's tonight. You interested?"

"Count me in."

"As long as you're not buyin', of course."

"You know me all too well, buddy. See ya later."

He gave a quick salute and went on his way down the stairs, following the colour coded directions on the wall to the main security foyer. The doors slid open obligingly as he reached them, and he looked around at the unusually sparse room with a cocked eyebrow. Barney walked to the front desk where his supervisor Burton was tapping away at his computer.

Burton glanced over at him out of the corner of his eye. "Hey," he said, keeping his eyes firmly locked on the monitor in front of him, "nice of you to show up this morning, Calhoun."

Barney opened his mouth to protest, but Burton beat him to the punch.

"I know, I know… trouble with the access system. We've been experiencing problems all over the facility." He tapped in a few more commands before looking over at Barney. "I hope you're ready for a long shift."

"Cheerful as always, I see," Barney muttered as he headed off, increasing his pace when he heard Burton's chair swivel menacingly.

As he continued on his way to the locker room, Barney noted that it wasn't very busy; hardly surprising, considering how late everyone had been made by the electrical glitches and crashes all around the facility.

But that didn't make it any less strange to see it empty.

The door to the locker room slid open without protest, and Barney made his way to his locker, hoping that Reynolds, the resident prankster of his security unit, hadn't put some kind of surprise in his locker. Hopefully he would have his hands as full as everyone else in the facility.

He punched in his code and wrapped his hand around the locker's handle. His eyes firmly shut, he opened the door, expecting anything from rotten eggs to feathers to shoot out at him.

Nothing.

One eye opened, then the other. His locker was refreshingly prank free.

Of course, it wasn't as if Barney was the poor, defenceless victim. Truth be told, he had pranked perhaps more people than even Reynolds, the butt of his jokes usually being Gordon. But the bespectacled scientist would always smile and easily shrug it off, which just seemed to invite even more attempts. But Gordon was a

slippery devil, and only the most accomplished pranksters could catch him without becoming the victim of some horrible practical joke themselves.

Still feeling slightly wary, Barney checked over his locker's contents. The two books on the top shelf, 'The Truth about Aliens' and 'Government Conspiracies', were both intact, although that didn't really surprise the security officer. Very few of his colleagues shared his interest in government conspiracies, and even less about extra terrestrials.

Some pictures of his girlfriend Lauren hung on the inside of the door, with a small note hastily scribbled beneath that read 'Buy flowers for Lauren'. He groaned and rubbed his eyes, remembering the somewhat fraught circumstances that had led him to the need to buy his girlfriend of several months some flowers. While it wouldn't buy her forgiveness totally, it would help him lead into the grovelling on his knees part of the equation.

And at the bottom of the locker lay a closed box that contained the source of the agitation; a stuffed toy called a 'Chumtoad'. Although Barney had never displayed any affection for the toys in the entire time he had been with Lauren, she seemed to think that he would like one, and had bought it for him.

That had been several months ago, and the toy had remained unpacked for all of the intervening time. And when Lauren had come by for a visit a few weeks ago, she had seen the Chumtoad neatly packed away in his locker and become… irritated.

Hence the need to buy flowers.

A sigh escaped his lips, and, after checking it for any hidden 'surprises', he put on his armoured vest. He grabbed his helmet and turned, kicking the locker shut behind him and waiting for the clicking sound of the locking mechanism as he headed back to the main area for his assignment. He plonked the helmet on his head and tied the

chinstrap as he made his way out of the locker room and into the corridor.

He exchanged a nod with a passing scientist as he entered the foyer area, but he simply ignored him. Barney scowled and shook his head. Besides Gordon, Dr Vance and Dr Kleiner, all the scientists in the facility were… disagreeable, to say the least. So much so that a workplace relations officer had been called in to address the hostilities between the science and security divisions.

True, it had been a very amusing day for himself, but everyone else didn't seem to agree.

"Oh, *now what…"*

Barney's attention was brought back to Burton, who was now quite angrily tapping away at his computer. With a polite and serene smile, Barney leant against the desk.

"Problem, sir?"

His supervisor glared up at him. "Looks like some people are having some problems with the main access elevator in Sector G." He smiled. "Why don't you go over there and see what you can do?"

Barney's expression remained frozen. "Why, of course, sir. Why wouldn't I want to go all the way over to Sector G?"

"That's the spirit." He gave a little wave. "Have fun."

His supervisor returned to his typing, and Barney pushed off from the desk, knowing that if he remained any longer it would most likely lead to another of the many 'incidents' that he was well known for beginning when it concerned authority figures.

Dr Kleiner called it an attitude problem.

Gordon called it 'the experience that is being Barney Calhoun'.

Barney called it speaking his mind.

With a sigh and a shake of his head, he headed for the firing range to collect his sidearm.

There were actually people using the firing range, which surprised him. Considering how busy everyone he had seen so far seemed to be, it looked odd to see people just relaxing. Not that Barney considered target practise relaxing.

He walked to the firearm collection booth, where a blonde security guard was idly thumbing through a magazine. Barney only vaguely recognised her, but he had an idea in his head that her name was Jenny, but he didn't know why. She looked up at him, her blue eyes slightly dulled by the boredom of her post.

"How's it goin'?"

A dainty hand slothfully reached under the desk and out of Barney's sight, and emerged with a 9mm Beretta handgun.

"I know you're not scheduled on the range for another few days, Calhoun, but if you want to squeeze in a few shots…" she waved a dismissive thumb towards the observation window that led to the firing range. "… there's plenty of room."

Barney tried not to let his alarm register. Damn it! She knew his name. Why didn't he know who she was? They'd probably only met once. What was it with women knowing names?

"You okay Calhoun?"

"Huh? Oh, I'm fine… um… you."

Holstering his weapon, he turned on his heel and made his way out as quickly and inconspicuously as he could manage.

Which wasn't very much.

Barney continued on his way to the tram station for his sector, nodding to both security personnel and scientists as he went, although only getting any real response from the former.

The sheer scale of the Black Mesa facility still astounded Barney as he walked through it, seeing scientists busy at work on control panels of such varying degrees of complexity and importance it boggled his mind. With how much they had to occupy their minds with, Barney sometimes thought that it wasn't any wonder that scientists felt they were so above everyone else.

He stepped out onto the station platform and groaned when he saw no tram. It was a matter of course at the facility to always have a tram at every platform at any given time. However, with the recent computer and access system malfunctions, it wasn't really much of a surprise.

Barney heard the rustling of a newspaper being turned, and looked over at the bench beside him. An off duty scientist sat there looked up at him. "If you're waiting for the tram to sector G, you're probably better off walking it. I heard someone say that all the trams in this end of the facility are having problems."

The security officer sighed and nodded. "Okay. Thanks."

A sign on the other side of the platform read 'maintenance access', and Barney headed over to it, letting out another heavy sigh as he realised he would have to negotiate his way through part of the canal area. The slimy, slippery and smelly canal area.

He loved this job.

Barney pushed the button to lower the bridge across the surprisingly loud miniature river beneath him.

A red light blinked on and off above the large button, and Barney looked down the tunnel and noticed a tram coming around the

corner. He crossed his arms and impatiently waited for it to cross out of the way.

As it went by, Barney couldn't help but notice the sole occupant of the tram. A man with an unhealthily pale complexion and entirely too neat suit stood deadly still, his only movements to brush some dust from his jacket or to readjust his immaculately knotted tie. He seemed completely ignorant of Barney. All of the references to the 'men in black' from his government conspiracy books rushed back to him, and Barney desperately tried to get a better look at the man as the tram turned the corner and travelled out of his sight.

The red light turned to green, and, defeated, Barney pushed the button to allow the bridge to come down. Already wanting to sit back with a nice cold beer, the security officer continued on through a door and up several flights of stairs before coming out at the sector G tram station. He followed the colour coded directions on the wall to the waiting elevator, where a scientist was impatiently tapping his foot. Another scientist accompanied him, but he didn't seem too interested in what was going on.

"Well, it's about time. We don't pay you people to mosey about at your own convenience. Make this thing work so we can all get on with this miserable day."

And with that, he turned around to look out the thin view port of the elevator.

"Maybe you can kiss my ass," Barney muttered, looking at the control panel for the elevator.

"What did you say?" the haughty scientist gasped.

"I said 'maybe it's your security pass.'"

The scientist's bearded colleague chuckled, but quickly stopped under the glare that was shot his way.

Barney pushed a few buttons and inserted his ID card into the waiting slot. The panel beeped a few times, and the doors promptly closed.

"There. All better," he said, being as patronising as humanly possible.

The offending scientist just turned around to once again look out the view port as the elevator groaned to life and slowly began to descend.

The bearded scientist gave Barney an apologetic smile. "Don't mind Philips. He's always like this."

Barney frowned. "How the hell do you live with him?"

"I don't. I just work with him."

He grinned.

The elevator came to a halt, and the lights suddenly blinked out.

"Oh, no…" Philips muttered.

Barney pushed a few buttons on the control panel, but came up with nothing.

"It's probably those Anomalous Materials people again," Philips snorted derisively. "Pushing their equipment too hard, dabbling in who knows what… I'd be surprised if there's one good brain among them."

A wry smile crossed Barney's lips.

I might know one or two.

The elevator started up again, although the lights continued to flicker incessantly.

"There. Nothin' to worry about."

Philips didn't seem to believe him.

Once again, the elevator stopped.

And then continued on again.

And, then again, it came to a halt, this time leaving them overlooking a loading dock through the view port.

The lights then completely shut off, replaced by the red glow of the emergency lighting system. The overhead system came to life.

" *Warning. Extreme electromagnetic field detected in Sector C."*

Barney frowned. *Gordon?*

He looked over at Philips and saw a smug look on the scientists face. "What did I tell you? Sector C is Anomalous Materials. Those idiots. Who do-?"

The wall next to him exploded, sending shards of metal into and through him, throwing him violently across the elevator before he came to a stop on the floor, his body twisted and contorted horrifically.

Philips' companion fell back in fear. "My God!"

A strange noise assaulted Barney's ears, almost like a small explosion, and he turned to see an orb of green light appear before his very eyes on the dock. Just as suddenly, it vanished, replaced by a strange small creature that could only be described as a three legged eye. Two legs at the front and one at the back, it looked like some kind of horrific mix between a snake and a dog.

It was quickly joined by three more of its kind, and they all headed off to parts unknown, heading towards the tunnel through which supply trams would be driven.

A door beside them opened, and a security officer opened fire on them. They quickly turned and ran from the wildly firing officer.

He turned to look up the tram tunnel and waved his hands frantically. Barney heard him yell before he leapt to the side as a tram crashed through, derailing as it came out of the tunnel and flying through the air, tossing its several passengers across the dock and into the walls. Some were crushed by falling debris, while others were killed upon impact.

Barney ached to get out and help. A whimper from behind him reminded him of his duty, and he headed back over to Philips' companion, who was now huddled in the corner of the elevator, well and truly horrified by what had happened to his friend.

Barney wasn't too crazy about it either, but he had to get them out of the elevator; he had no idea how long it would be before-

A series of small explosions above them rocked the elevator, and Barney heard the sound of metal groaning against metal.

A slow, ominous creak echoed down the shaft.

He closed his eyes.

"Shit…"

A loud snap rang in his ears, and the elevator plummeted. All light blurred as they fell faster and faster. Barney looked up at the roof to see if there was a vent. He smiled desperately as he spotted his quarry. He grabbed the scientist by the arm.

"C'mon, we've gotta-"

The elevator crashed to the ground, the impact crushing and compressing it into half its size.

The alarms rang on.

(A/N: Folks, while I appreciate the sentiment, no more telling me that I'm 'overdue' for an update, okay? There's encouragement and there's *encouragement*, you know what I mean?

Mark my words, I *will* finish this story. You have my solemn promise on whatever deity you please. Just don't expect it to happen overnight. ;)

That said, keep them reviews coming!

Next Chapter: Unforeseen Consequences)

Unforeseen Consequences

Disclaimer: I don't own *Half-Life.*

The Black Mesa Incident

Chapter Five: Unforeseen Consequences

As he regained consciousness, the only thing that Gordon could feel was a tremendous pressure on his legs. After his eyes fluttered open drowsily, he looked down and found out why.

His legs were pinned under a sheet of metal that had most likely fallen from the wall or ceiling.

The sound of the emergency alarms assaulted his ears. It was a noise he had never heard before in person, and it was doing to nothing to calm his already frazzled nerves.

The test chamber had been ripped apart. Cables and wires flopped out of the cracked walls like severed limbs, sparking wildly. A large pipe was dangling overhead, swaying ominously above Gordon like the sword of Damocles.

Looking down, Gordon gripped the top of the sheet of metal and tried to push it off him. It wouldn't move. He tried again, his face reddening with effort as he clenched his teeth and pushed. Still nothing.

A quick wiggle of his feet confirmed he still had feeling in his legs. After taking a breath, Gordon pushed up with his legs, barely moving the metal up. He reached under with his hands, and added to the upward force his legs were exerting. With a massive grunt of effort, Gordon rolled away from the metal and to safety.

He struggled to regain his breath as he lay beside the metal. Slowly, he pulled himself up so that he was sitting, rubbing his eyes with his

gloved hands.

And then he heard it.

The same noise that the strange creature had made. Almost frozen with fear, Gordon slowly turned his head. Gradually, he saw the twisted form of the alien out of the corner of his eye.

And it was looking right at him.

Gordon saw its clawed hands come together, and remembered the bolt of green electricity it had shot at him. He tried to move, but he was still paralysed with fear.

He saw the brilliant green lights reflecting off the walls of the chamber, the sparks fizzling as they came in contact with the metal.

With a sudden burst of miraculous energy, Gordon sprinted across the test chamber and to the airlock doors, which had been blasted open by the resonance cascade.

Gordon leapt forward, his arms held out in front of him in a dive as he hurtled through the opening in the doors. He landed in the airlock with a thud, rolling along until he hit the metal wall, hard. A grunt escaped his lips as the wind was knocked out of him.

A burst of green electricity shot through the opening and exploded violently against the wall behind Gordon, showering him with sparks. Panic powering him, he looked around the room for anything that might help him.

His eyes fell on the retinal scanner that stood beside the airlock exit, the screen below it flickering on and off deliriously. Below the damaged scanner lay the body of Philips, who was clearly dead.

Gordon had never seen a dead body in his life, let alone anyone he knew. But at that moment, he didn't particularly care who it was.

Adrenaline and survival instinct were still pushing him onward, blanking out anything that might hinder him.

He scampered over to the scanner and put his eyes to the lens, hoping that whatever was causing the scanner to spark and sputter so was also hindering its access to the database.

" *Access.. Unauthorised… unauthorised…"*

Gordon heard clawed footsteps approaching outside the airlock, tapping eerily on the metal floor of the test chamber.

" *Unauthorised personnel."*

The door slid open. A desperate smile on his features, Gordon darted through the door before it closed again. He fell through into the corridor outside, landing on his back. The usual white lighting had been replaced by a neon red hue that bathed the entire corridor. Before him lay a security guard, a bushy bearded scientist beside him, desperately pumping his chest and periodically checking his breathing. Gordon's thoughts went back to Philips' dead body, and, with the danger now gone, a wave of nausea hit him before he could even move.

And then he heard a noise behind him. He turned, and his eyes widened in horror behind his spectacles.

The door was opening and closing randomly, unable to choose a position. And behind it was the same creature that had been attacking him, now wandering towards the door.

Gordon quickly got to his feet and almost fell on the scientist as he ran over to him.

"Do you have retinal scanner access?"

The scientist wasn't paying attention to him. "What?"

Gordon grabbed him by the shoulders, turning him so that they looked on another in the eyes.

" *Do you have retinal scanner access?"*

"Yes, but for God's sake, let me save his life before thinking about your own self preservation!"

The bespectacled scientist pointed to the door angrily. "We're *all* going to be dead if you don't close that door now!"

His companion frowned and threw a quick glance at the door. He promptly froze as he saw the alien creature coming towards them, almost at the door. Gordon glared at him.

"Go!"

The scientist ran to the undamaged retinal scanner beside the door and put his eyes to it. The door beeped compliantly and shut the door just as the alien reached it. Long brown fingers snaked around the side of the door as it attempted to shut, but all that was accomplished by the act was the loss of its fingers. The small brown tentacles fell to the floor, writhing and wriggling in shared agony before dying.

The two scientists had a brief moment of silence before the security guard lying between them occupied their thoughts.

"How did you survive the Cascade?" he asked Gordon, returning to pumping the guards chest.

Gordon shook his head. He was still trying to forget the visions he had seen while in the test chamber. Strange, glowing landscapes and three armed creatures that threw electricity… it was all like some horrible dream.

"Are you all right?"

He shook his head quickly. "Sorry, I… sorry."

"How did you survive?" The scientist looked him up and down. "Never mind. You're wearing a hazard suit. That's all I need to know."

Gordon's gaze fell to the guard. "Can you help him?"

"I don't know. Regardless, I'll need some help to get him out of here and to a proper medical facility." He looked at Gordon. "You'll have to go up."

"Me?"

"You're the one with the hazard suit. And I have medical training."

There wasn't really any argument against that. And as much as Gordon resented the idea, he would have to be the one to go and get help.

"I'll… send help back as soon as I can."

The scientist nodded before resuming his efforts to save the guards life.

Gordon turned and walked down the corridor warily, stopping almost every other step when he heard a noise. The sound of the blaring alarms was putting him on edge, and combined with the flashing red lights, they were threatening to make him hyperventilate.

He took deep breaths as he approached the corner leading into another corridor, which would in turn take him to the elevator. Gordon hoped that Eli was still alive up there.

The elevator sprang to life as he pushed the button, although the sound of creaking metal straining above him didn't fill him with confidence. The elevator turned and reached its destination, and not a moment too soon for Gordon. Gordon stepped through the doors quickly, surprised at how easily they opened.

Gordon looked around the room and immediately saw Eli crouched beside Kleiner, who was wounded on the floor. He made his way

over, for some reason reluctant to announce his presence. As he did so, he heard their conversation.

"I never thought I'd even *see* a Resonance Cascade, let alone *create* one. Why wouldn't they listen?" Kleiner seemed feverish and not quite aware of what was happening around him.

Eli sighed. "We tried to warn them." He opened his mouth to say something more, but noticed Gordon approaching them. As he leapt to his feet, his expression became one halfway between joy and amazement.

"Gordon! You're alive!" Brown eyes took in Gordon's orange and black clothing. "Thank God for that hazard suit." He gestured to Kleiner sat on the floor, leant against the wall. "I'm afraid to move him, and all the phones are out. Please, get to the surface and tell them we're stranded down here."

"Me?"

"Who else is going to do it? You've got the hazard suit. And I'm not exactly as young as I used to be."

"But-"

A heavy yet comforting hand landed on his shoulder. "Gordon. You can do this. Just use the tram system to the get to the surface, and get help."

The bespectacled scientist paused before nodding slowly, not sure why *he* had been chosen as Fate's plaything.

At least it would all be over soon.

Eli smiled kindly. "All right." He looked to the other side of the hallway, where the door leading to the control room was sealed shut. "Now, you'll need me to access the retinal scanners. I'm sure the rest of the science team'll be glad to help you."

The two made their way over, and Eli opened the door for him.

"Be careful out there, Gordon. There's never been a Resonance Cascade of this size before. Who knows what the effects could have been."

He nodded silently, not particularly in a talking mood.

"Just get to the tram station and get to the surface." He smiled. "We'll be seeing each other again in a few hours. You'll see."

Gordon nodded again, although he felt a bit more comfortable with the situation. Eli always had that effect on him.

"Thanks, Eli."

"Just be safe out there, all right?"

"… Right."

After a lingering look with his old friend, Gordon stepped into the control room, and the door automatically closed shut behind him. The wall on his left was a control panel running the entire length of the room. He could see the test chamber through the observation port on the right wall. The emitters were fluctuating wildly, stray bolts of electricity firing off in every which direction.

Gordon continued to the door on the other side of the room cautiously.

One foot in front of the other.

He reached out to the door with his hand in an instinctual gesture as he came ever closer to it, even thought he knew it had no door handle. Only the maintenance areas of the facility had door handles and knobs.

A bolt of electricity came through the observation port, almost grazing Gordon's nose before it impacted the control panel wall

beside him. At first, nothing happened. A small sparking noise came from within the panel, and Gordon, having heard such things before, leapt out of the way as the wall exploded.

More electricity poured out from the emitters, hitting the wall again and again. Gordon's ears rang from the continuous explosions. Like a frightened animal, Gordon scrambled for the door, all the while keeping his body low. The door slid open, and he fell through into the corridor, his breathing shallow and panicked.

Now he was beginning to hyperventilate. He closed his eyes and concentrated on his breathing.

One, two, three, four…

It was something Dr Kleiner, of all people, had taken him through. Inhaling through the nose to the count of four, exhaling through the mouth for four.

Calmness gradually returned. At least, as calm as one could be, considering the circumstances. He heaved himself to his feet and carried on his way.

It didn't take him long to arrive at the elevator leading up to the main area of the Anomalous Materials section. As he reached the white framed doors, his foot tapped against something on the ground. Gordon looked down and saw a well used crowbar lying before him, its red coat of paint peeling off from use. Beside it lay an open toolbox.

Gordon ignored it and pushed the button for the elevator.

Nothing happened.

He pushed again.

The button didn't light up, nothing.

With a paranoid glance over his shoulder, Gordon pushed the button again.

And explosion from the top of the elevator shaft made Gordon hop back from fright, and he could only watch as the elevator shot down the shaft in front of his eyes, two hapless scientists trapped inside.

He tried to ignore their screams before they hit the ground with a mighty crash.

Gordon slowly got to his feet and inspected the doors for any way in. A quick check around the doorframe revealed no emergency release button or lever.

Something occurred to him. The HEV Suit clad scientist turned and looked down at the crowbar beneath him, the tool almost inviting him to pick it up.

Warily, Gordon knelt and scooped it up. It wasn't as heavy as he had been expecting. It felt strange in his hand, as though it didn't belong there. Probably because it didn't. Gordon was never an advocate of violence, and he knew all to well from tabloids and psycho killer movies that crowbars were as much a weapon as any other tool its size.

However, it was his only way out right now.

Inexplicable determination powering him, Gordon wedged the end of the crowbar between the door. That done, he took three deep breaths before pulling as hard as he could manage. He grunted with effort, now regretting his decision to forgo weight lifting at the gym.

With less effort than he expected, he managed to wrench the doors asunder and squeezed through the gap onto the small ledge that would usually be level with the elevator floor.

Resisting the instinctual urge to look down at the poor souls beneath, Gordon tucked the crowbar under his arm and grabbed on to the red

ladder to his left. He began climbing up, seeing the doors on the floor above him open. As he ascended, he began hearing gun shots echoing through the doorway and down the elevator shaft.

Gordon froze as he reached the ledge that would take him to the next level. What was going on up there? Was someone fighting those creatures? Gordon wondered whether he would have the courage to attack one of those… things armed with only a crowbar. Hell, he was reluctant to the idea of going up against one of them with a machine gun.

The gunfire stopped.

"Target practice sure paid off today…" a voice muttered, the attitude filled voice echoing down the elevator shaft. Gordon clambered up over the ledge, recognising the voice as a security guard named Hastings, although his first name escaped him at the moment.

"What the- ah, hell."

The gun shots started up again, but Gordon was already on top of the ledge, and couldn't go back. He looked up and saw what vaguely looked like a human being lumbering toward Hastings, who was desperately pumping it full of lead from his standard issue handgun. The strange creature looked liked a human for the most part, although it's hands were contorted and stretched to a gruesome degree, the fingers looking more like thin hooks than digits.

On its head sat a creature that Gordon could only compare to a crab, with long claws extended forward instead of a pincers. The smaller crab-like creature seemed to be covering the entire head, completely replacing it, pulsating in a manner that made Gordon nauseous to think about.

Hastings spotted him, but didn't stop his barrage of gunfire. He had to yell over the noise.

"Gordon! Man, am I glad to see you. What the hell are these things? And why are they wearing science team uniforms?"

Gordon checked again. Much to his fascination and his horror, the creatures were indeed wearing science team uniforms, albeit torn and bloodied almost beyond recognition. Gordon wondered how Hastings noticed it.

His curiosity did not last long, as the zombiefied scientist turned towards him, having finally noticed his presence. With a huge swing of its lumbering arms, its claws sailed through the air towards Gordon, and would have travelled completely through him if not for his own fear causing him to trip up on his own feet and fall the ground behind him.

Hastings reloaded his pistol and continued firing.

"Hit it with the crowbar, Gordon!"

The creature continued forward at him, ignoring Hastings' gunfire. Gordon scrambled backward on the floor, going as fast as his hands and feet would carry him while he lay on his back.

"Gordon! Hit it!"

Hastings continued yelling over his gunfire, the presence of another zombie behind him going unnoticed.

It eviscerated the back of his skull with one swipe of its claws, sending blood, bone and brain matter across the floor and walls.

Sudden energy exploding into his veins, Gordon scrambled to his feet and ran as fast as his legs would take him.

He ran straight through the malfunctioning secure doors leading to the personnel area, his lungs burning, his feet pounding on the smooth tile floor, and ran straight through the corridors until he arrived at the lobby area. There, he dropped the crowbar, collapsed

to his knees held himself, breathing deeply and rapidly until that was all he could concentrate on. Gordon clenched his eyes shut, trying to push aside the mental image of Hasting's face as the back of his head was carved open and the contents inside displayed everywhere.

With a jolt, he even realised he had a piece of Hastings on the front of his suit, resting on the lambda symbol.

He picked up the crowbar and scraped it off, feeling the bile build up in his throat before he even saw the pinkish blob hit the floor. A groan escaped his throat as he vomited across the floor, the liquid covering the piece of Hastings that was left, much to Gordon's relief and dismay.

Shakily, he pushed himself to his feet, and walked to the airlock doors that would lead him to the tram station, and, finally, freedom.

He pushed the button on the console beside the doors and waited for them to open.

Nothing.

He pushed the button again.

Still nothing.

With desperation distorting his features, he pressed the button again and again, but to no avail. In a final act of both rage and hopelessness, Gordon slammed his crowbar into the panel, the pointed end going straight through the thin metal of the keypad. Sparks flew in every direction, and Gordon took a step back, his crowbar easily sliding out of the wreckage of the panel as he did so.

With a groan, the lower half of the thick metal airlock doors opened, and Gordon crawled through, overjoyed to see the doors at the other end of the airlock already open.

As he stepped out onto the train platform, his desperate smile disappeared.

The walkway was gone, ripped away by some side effect of the resonance cascade. What remained barely reached halfway to where the train would usually stop. On the precariously groaning platform stood another of Gordon's colleagues, although fear was blocking his memory somewhat.

The balding scientist stood completely still, his arms held out on either side of him as though he were trying to keep his balance.

Gordon took a cautious step forward, a 'what's wrong?' on his lips.

"No! Stay back!"

The platform gave way, and the scientist frantically grabbed onto a dangling cable, his grip rapidly being lost.

"Gordon!"

The scientist fell, screaming the entire way before being interrupted by a sickening crunch. Something growled down below, and Gordon backed away from the platform and quickly scuttled back to the lobby area. He tried to push the sound of the man hitting the ground from his mind, his thoughts going a mile a minute as he tried to think about what to do with a logical, analytical mind.

He couldn't get a train out, and all the communication lines were cut…

The sewage maintenance area. If he remembered correctly, he could find his way to the Sector C office complex and from there, it was simplicity itself to get to the surface.

But how to get to sewage maintenance… the corridor was blocked off by rubble, and no amount of heaving with his crowbar would be able to move it.

A dislodged vent cover behind the reception desk caught Gordon's eye, and he made his way over. He crouched and wedged the crowbar in the gap between the vent and the wall and pulled. It was surprisingly easy to pull off, which Gordon found slightly reassuring.

Not that he'd be crawling through vents that much anyway. With any luck, he would be able to find a working elevator, get up to the surface, and start to put this whole mess behind him.

He crawled through the small vent and ended up in a control room, the huge control panels that once ran the length of the room thrown haphazardly around the room. Alarms blared, pounding at his ears.

A quick survey of the room revealed a ventilation duct in the upper right hand corner of the room. Gordon headed towards it.

One of the control panels on Gordon's right exploded and fell towards him. With a sudden thrust of his legs, he managed to shove himself out of the way before it crashed to the ground. He continued on, instinctively keeping his head down as he went for the vent.

A strange squeaking noise stopped him in his tracks.

This wasn't a chair or door squeaking, either. It had an almost… organic quality to it.

Gordon slowly turned and yelped in surprise as a strange crab creature like the one that had been attached to the scientist zombie's head flew at him.

He fell to the ground and scrambled back, eventually getting to his feet. Not entirely sure what he was doing, he held up his crowbar above his head and put his other hand out in front of him, as though it would be able to stop the small creature if it lunged at him again.

After steadying itself, the crab did indeed jump at Gordon, again going for his head. Gordon reflexively ducked out of the way, and the crab hit the wall behind him, falling to the ground in a slight daze.

Survival instinct powering him, Gordon brought his crowbar down on the creatures' white, fleshy head again and again until there was barely anything of the creature left, and he was just hitting the ground with his crowbar.

He forced himself not to dwell on what he had just done. It would only lead to more delays, and Gordon needed to keep moving.

Keep moving.

The vent was ripped open easily, and Gordon clambered through.

Keep moving.

Gordon stopped to check on a scientist who was seemingly sat at his laptop computer in the dark, but quickly left as fast as his legs could take him when he found a crab creature firmly latched onto his head.

Don't stop, keep moving.

He continued on into the sewage maintenance area.

The doors had been ripped open by something, the safety glass from their frames spread across the floor in tiny granules. Gordon didn't want to think about what could so easily break such thick, reinforced glass.

Gordon walked through the maintenance area slowly, paranoia and fear slowing every step. As he entered another chamber, the presence of something other than some slimy creature caught his attention, and his green eyes quickly focused on it.

His mouth hung open in a slight gape as he saw who was looking down at him from an overhead walkway.

It was the man in the suit. The one who had sent chills down his spine before he had reached the lab, and the one who had been arguing with the Administrator's replacement.

Barely acknowledging Gordon, the man straightened his eyes and turned, leaving down a doorway.

"Wait!" Gordon managed, going for the door that would hopefully lead him to a ladder.

He stopped in his tracks as a whirring noise assaulted his ears, almost deafening him.

A creature roughly the same size as a dog came hopping round the corner, its one back leg struggling to keep up with its front two. Hundreds of dark brown eyes adorned its flat front, and Gordon struggled to see any mouth or nose whatsoever.

The whining became stronger, the creature squatting slightly as though it were concentrating. Suddenly, the sound stopped. Waves of white energy pounded out of the creature, knocking Gordon off his feet and into the wall behind him. The walkway above Gordon was knocked from its fittings and crashed to the floor beside him, sending a cloud of dust billowing out.

Gordon squinted as the dust attacked his eyes, and he struggled to see the creature as it powered up another attack. His ears having somewhat adapted to the noise, Gordon got to his feet and tried to locate the source, judging from where the creature had been the last time he had seen it.

With a swing of his crowbar and a crunching noise, the whining stopped, replaced by what sounded like a dog's moan of pain. The dust cleared, Gordon winced as he saw the twitching state of the animal beneath him. His eyes clenched shut, he slammed his foot down on where he guessed the head was, ending its cries of pain.

He continued on, encountering the same creatures again and again.

As he went on, he became more and more proficient at killing them. The small crab creatures would crawl to within a few metres of him before leaping at him, allowing him time to spot them and move out

of the way. They also seemed to lack any eyesight, relying on their other senses to guide them.

The bigger, dog-like creatures travelled in packs, and he found they were easily frightened off with a sharp strike of the crowbar's blunt side.

Gordon hadn't encountered any more of the zombies, nor any more like the creature he saw in the Anomalous Materials test chamber.

Hopefully, he wouldn't have to.

After what felt like weeks of swimming through vomit-inducing sludge and walking through corridors that looked the same, Gordon finally reached the elevator that would take him up to the office complex.

A dead security guard lay before it, blood trailing behind her until it gathered in a pool beneath her. Trying not to look at her, Gordon carefully slipped her Glock pistol from the holster around her waist, as well as the spare rounds kept on her belt.

He looked down at his hazard suit and let out a small breath of irritation as he finally found the one thing it lacked.

Pockets.

After taking and blowing out a deep, shaky breath, Gordon wrestled the holster and belt from the security guard's body, occasionally having to stop to allow himself to vomit around the corner.

With the equipment liberated of its original owner, Gordon pushed the button to summon the elevator.

With a heavenly ping, the doors opened, and Gordon stepped in, pressing the button to go up too fast for the elevator to comply.

With his crowbar in one hand and his gun firmly tucked away in its holster, Gordon prayed that he wouldn't have to draw it on anyone.

Hopefully, the resonance cascade would have been mostly confined to the Anomalous Materials lab.

Gordon took some small comfort in that.

(A/N: Well, this was a long time coming, and I apologise for how long it took. Real life things, and all that. There *is* a lot of ground to cover in this chapter, and I had to pick and choose what bits to keep in and what to remove for the sake of pace. Whether I succeeded or not, well, that's up to you.

Anyway, review!

Next Chapter: Opposing Force

Update 20/08/2010: Just a little tweak to add Dr Kleiner to both this chapter and 'Anomalous Materials' - who, according to Marc Laidlaw, is retroactively the other scientist with Eli. There's been no official mention of where Magnusson was during the resonance cascade, and writing him in would have required more of a rewrite than I was willing to do - inserting Kleiner was just a matter of changing some names and switching some dialogue around. The price I pay for being a perfectionist nerd, I suppose!)

Opposing Force

Disclaimer: I don't own *Half-Life.*

The Black Mesa Incident

Chapter Six: Opposing Force

The loud, harsh voices of his fellow soldiers was all that was keeping Corporal Adrian Shephard from falling to sleep. All his life, he had fallen to sleep in vehicles as though he were a baby. Cars, Trains, Planes, Helicopters… hell, he once fell to sleep on the back of a motorcycle. Fell off and broke his arm, too, but he never told his squad that. They ribbed him enough as it was.

"Hey, Shephard! Keep those eyes open! You don't want to miss this!"

Now aware, Adrian looked out of the side of the Osprey Helicopter, half expecting to see something of interest.

Nothing but rocky cliff faces and the burning sun.

The other soldiers laughed, and Adrian rested his head back once again.

The radio in the cockpit burst into life in an obnoxiously loud and high pitched way, the voices barely audible through all the static.

Thorne's low rumble of a voice came over from opposite Adrian. Thorne was one of the more respected members of the group, mostly because he could beat seven shades of shit out of anyone who gave him attitude. And God forbid somebody made a racist black joke. He certainly wasn't a 'let it go' kind of guy.

Adrian liked him because he treated everyone in the group as equals.

"Just where the hell are we, anyway?"

Jack Kowalski, the engineer sat beside Thorne, laughed. "Well the pilot thought we were goin' to your mother's house. So far," he chuckled, "this all looks familiar."

Kowalski was a bit of an enigma to Adrian. Sometimes he was an asshole, and other times he was the best guy to have with you. It seemed that in the personal moments, he had no idea what he was doing. But if you were in a training situation, a battle, or even a bar brawl, he would have your back and you could trust him.

At least, that's what Adrian thought. He had a tendency to overanalyse everything.

Thorne was not amused. "Yeah, that's real cute, Jack."

The only response was a cocky grin, Kowalski's cigarette dangling loosely between his lips. "Anytime, anywhere!"

Adrian didn't know how he could leave a smoking cigarette in his mouth like that. Whenever he had tried it, the smoke had gone in his eyes and made them water like crazy.

One of those things his buddies laughed at him for.

God, he needed a smoke.

Thorne sniffed the air. "Hey, man, you smell that?" he asked.

Adrian wasn't sure who he was talking to, so he decided to respond.

That was, if Kowalski hadn't beaten him to the punch. "Smell what?"

"Smells like… another babysittin' job to me, man!"

"Yeah, no shit, man!"

Richards suddenly sprang to life beside Adrian, almost making him jump. "Babysitting job, my ass! This has training mission written all over it! Why else would they withhold our orders for so long, huh?"

Richards was always a mouthy bastard. His high pitch nails-on-a-chalk-board voice didn't help, either. He was one of those guys who Adrian always saw in movies, but thought they were just confined to fiction. The kind of 'asshole for no reason' kind of guy. And if he was hiding some heart of gold under there, Adrian was yet to see it.

Thorne snorted his agreement. "Yeah, man. What the hell's up with that? Throwin' all of us into this hunk of junk and not even telling us what we're going in for!"

At this moment, the Commanding Officer of the group (whom everyone simply called Brown for a reason Adrian was yet to discover) spoke up.

"Do you have a problem, Private? I will give you your orders when we reach the LZ!"

"Sir, yes sir!"

The response wasn't without some venom.

Kowalski shrugged. "I don't really give a damn what we're goin' in for, as long as I get to kill me somethin'."

"I heard that!" Richards said, smirking.

A relative silence descended in the cabin, and Adrian feared he might fall asleep again from the steady thrum of the helicopter blades.

"Man, if we're goin' in for another search and rescue operation, I'm gonna be pissed," Thorne grumbled, fiddling with his semi-automatic.

Kowalski grinned. "Yeah, and *I'm* gonna be pissed if I have to seek out and rescue your sorry ass!"

The radio crackled to life in the cockpit, but this time Adrian could hear it clearly.

" *Anybody got a clear view of the LZ yet?"*

" *Uh, negative, I-"*

"Hey, Shephard!"

Adrian slowly rolled his gaze over to Thorne. "Yeah?"

"What do *you* think of all this weird shit?"

It was something that Adrian prided himself on. As well as being an uncanny marksman, the other members of his group would always ask him for his opinion. Maybe it was the fact that he almost always had a nose in a book or a newspaper.

This time, however, he wasn't particularly in the mood. Feeling slightly edgy after three weeks non-stop training, Adrian rested his head back and closed his eyes. "How the hell should I know? Probably some government cover-up. There *was* that weird pale guy in the suit watching us train for the past three weeks.

Kowalski took one last drag of his cigarette and expertly flicked it across the cabin and out the side of the helicopter. "Y'know, you're the only one who saw that guy, Shephard. You sure you're not making this stuff up?"

"It's not just me. There were rumours flying about all over the place about him before I finally saw him."

Davies, the medic sat on the far side of the cabin, was silent. As usual. No-one really knew Davies that well, and those that tried didn't succeed. Adrian suspected that the bespectacled medic was hiding something dark from his past. Adrian had decided to leave it

alone, though. No point in riling up the guy who might have his hands inside your guts someday.

Richards snorted. "Maybe he's dreaming about him." He elbowed Adrian in the ribs. "That guy in the suit break your heart, man?"

Kowalski snickered as he pulled out another cigarette. Adrian wished he wouldn't smoke them so openly.

"Shut the hell up, Richards. I'm trying to get my beauty sleep."

"Heh. I think someone's just findin' it hard to give up the smokes!"

Thorne shot Adrian a look. "You givin' up, Shephard?"

He shrugged loosely, idly looking out the side of the helicopter. Another Osprey came into view beside them.

"Helps you live longer."

Kowalski smirked yet again. "Yeah, well you know what helps me live longer? Good aim!"

Adrian shook his head. "Kowalski, you-"

His voice left his throat as he looked out at the Osprey beside them once again. Some… *thing* was floating above it. It looked like a Stingray fish. The way it moved, it was almost as if it was… alive…

"Hey, Shephard. You there?"

Thorne's words barely registered.

"What the hell're you lookin' at, man?"

Radio chatter became more and more intense from the cockpit as a beam of light came out of the underside of the Stingray ship.

Brown suddenly sprang to life from where he was stood at the head of the compartment. "All right, listen up privates! We have an extremely hostile situation-"

The Osprey beside them exploded.

Everyone struggled to get out of their seats and see what was going on. Adrian couldn't bring himself to move from his seat. The Stingray ship was gone.

Light surrounded the Osprey.

The radio continued to bleat on as Brown issued orders.

No-one was listening to him. Explosions rocked the helicopter, and Adrian was blinded. The last thing he saw before a piece of the helicopter's hull that had been blown loose knocked him unconscious was Brown falling out of the side of the side. Or was he jumping?

Blackness consumed Adrian.

The sound of an explosion rocked Adrian from unconsciousness. Slowly, he looked around and got his bearings, the act of sitting up costing him more energy than he could afford.

Machine gun fire rattled through the air.

His vision cleared, thanks in no small part to his HECU vest. The nanoscopic probes it injected into his bloodstream enabled faster healing. Adrian couldn't be more grateful right now.

The Osprey was half buried in the ground beside him. It had crashed through an electric fence.

Richards and Davies ran through his peripheral vision on the far side of the wreckage, shouting to each other over their own gunfire.

What were they shooting at?

Adrian got to is feet and tried to get over to them, only managing a slow stumble. A strange gurgling sound came from the other side of the Osprey. That was where Richards and Davies were aiming their fire.

Was it some kind of animal?

The familiar whine of an incoming air-to-ground missile echoed through the sky.

Before Adrian could look up, he was blown back into a rocky cliff face, his ears whining from the explosion.

Unconsciousness once again welcomed him into its peaceful embrace.

The vest did its work well. Still groggy, Adrian slowly brought his head up from where he was lying. He was on the floor in a small room. At least, he assumed it was a room. There could have been a staircase behind him for all he knew. Unfortunately for him, he didn't have the strength to turn over and find out.

Davies was knelt beside him, staring out the door with baited breath.

Adrian managed to turn his head to look out the doorway.

In front of him was a small bridge crossing a gorge. Richards ran out through the doorway on the other side, looking over his shoulder desperately.

"Get down!" Davies yelled.

Green electricity shot out from the doorway and hit Richards square in the back, knocking him flat on his face and sending him skidding

along the ground. He twitched violently as the electrical current wreaked havoc with his nervous system.

Silently cursing, Davies ran out onto the small bridge, opening fire with his 9mm on whatever had created the green electricity.

Adrian tried to get up and help.

All it accomplished was exhaustion, and, again, unconsciousness.

Adrian hoped that when he woke up again, the situation would be a little better.

(A/N: Next chapter: *Office Complex.*

All this feedback is very much appreciated, folks. So please don't stop yet; we've got a long way to go!

Incidentally, Happy New Year! I hope you all have a prosperous 2007.)

Office Complex

Disclaimer: I don't own *Half-Life.*

The Black Mesa Incident

Chapter Seven: Office Complex

The shakes were beginning to fade. Gordon put it down to the suit's influence, rather than anything he was doing.

Because he sure as hell wasn't calming down.

With another heavenly ding, the elevator doors opened, revealing the strobe-lit chaos outside.

After taking a deep breath bordering on a sigh, Gordon stepped out into the corridor, his boots making a patting noise against puddles that riddled the black and white checked floor.

A cable was hanging from the broken roof, sparks flying wildly in every direction. On the other side of the corridor, behind the cable, three of the head-crab things were making their way towards their new prey.

Gordon lifted the 9mm Glock up to bear, surprised at what little heft the weapon had in his increasingly less shaky hands.

The dangling cable did his work for him. Electricity sprang out and roasted the lead headcrab on the spot, quickly doing the same to the other two as they came closer.

The miniature Barney in Gordon's head smiled.

Kamikaze headcrabs.

He was left with no way through the corridor, however. Gordon looked around for any other methods of transportation around the cable. There was a large window on the other side of the corridor that he could easily smash with either the crowbar or the gun, but he didn't like his chances of surviving such extreme electrical current, even with the HEV suit. Green eyes settled on a jarred vent cover, and quickly darted back to the cable. It seemed to stare back at him.

Gordon tucked away the pistol and gripped his crowbar with both hands. He ran at the cover, attacking the corner that jutted out of the wall. As soon as the gap was big enough, Gordon dove through, ending up in a rather uncomfortable square shape. With a grunt that bordered on a frustrated growl, Gordon uncurled himself and began shuffling in the direction that emitted the most noise.

After what felt like a year of awkward, noisy, dirty crawling, Gordon came to another closed vent. With an ease that was beginning to concern him, he ripped off the cover with his crowbar and crawled into the space beyond.

He was in the space above a tiled ceiling, the support struts giving him a source of mild irritation as he tried to squeeze through them. He put one foot on the ceiling tiles and immediately fell through, landing with a thud on the very, *very* solid floor.

A groan escaped his lips as he pulled himself up. He felt something grasp him by the arm, and he lifted his crowbar.

"AAH! Wait, wait!"

Gordon froze as recognition set in, and he realised he was about to bludgeon Smithers to death.

"If I'd known it was you, I would have let you in."

The bespectacled scientist's shoulders sagged, and Gordon let his arm drop.

"Are you all right?" Smithers asked.

Gordon nodded silently, already searching the room for anything that might help him. He frowned. "'You would have let me in'? Did you hear me outside?"

Smithers nodded his head, curly brown hair bouncing back and forth with it. "But I didn't dare look. There are… *things* out there that can latch on to your face."

Silently, and without acknowledging Smithers' frightened words, Gordon got to his feet and walked to the two red fire doors that led outside. Looking cautiously out of the small square windows, Gordon saw the corridor he had just been in, deadly cable and all. Unfortunately, he was still on the wrong side.

He looked around the room. It was a common room, the drinks machines, well worn sofas and coffee tables attesting to that.

Gordon pushed his glasses back up his nose.

"What are you looking for?"

He spared a glance at Smithers. His bug like eyes were almost popping out of his head, they were so wide.

Gordon nodded out to the corridor. "I need to get past that cable."

"What cable?"

"In the corridor." He looked around the room.

"In the corridor?"

Gordon cast a slower look back at his newfound companion. "… yes."

"You're not going back out there, are you?"

"I have to."

"What? Why?"

"People are hurt downstairs."

"And?"

" *And*… I need to get to the surface."

Smithers rolled his eyes. "Everyone else is heading to the surface as well. But I think they're crazy not to stay put. Someone is bound to come along and rescue us."

The only response he got for the longest time was a blank stare.

Finally, Gordon gave him a helpless 'it's out of my hands' shrug and began exploring the room. There was a door behind one of the sofas.

"What are you doing?"

Without a word of explanation, Gordon tossed his crowbar on the sofa and squatted down by one the armrests, hooking his fingers underneath. With a grunt, he lifted his end and pulled it around.

Thankfully, the door was unlocked. Gordon went inside the small room, squinting at the intense red light that lit the room. In front of him was a power box, with a rather simple red lever to turn said power off.

After checking to make sure there wasn't something more complicated to it, Gordon pulled down on the lever. All of the lights went out, but were quickly replaced by dimmer emergency ones.

He was about to turn and leave when Smithers rammed the red lever back up, glaring at Gordon.

"Are you insane? We need the power on! These… creatures thrive on hunting you in dark conditions!"

Gordon cocked an eyebrow. "How do you know?" he asked, the tone more curiosity than accusation.

Smithers took it as the latter, throwing back his head so he was looking down his nose at Gordon. "I don't have to explain myself to you. Just leave the power on!"

"I need it off."

"No you don't, because you're not leaving."

Smithers got the same blank stare as before.

"I have to." Gordon gripped the lever again. "Sorry," he added, almost as an afterthought.

Down the lever went again, taking the lights with it.

Gordon stepped out of the room and bent over the sofa, scooping up his crowbar. "You can turn the power back on once I've passed the cable."

Smithers was silent until Gordon pressed down on the release bar on the red fire door.

"Wait."

Gordon stopped.

"Don't leave me here."

His eyebrows going up in surprise, Gordon turned to face Smithers, whose face took on a particularly haunted look in the dim emergency light.

"You can come with me, if you want," Gordon offered.

"Well… no, but… just don't leave me here. Brock left ten minutes go, saying he would be back. He never… just, please, don't leave me here alone."

Gordon sighed. "Smithers… you want to stay here *and* come with me. You can't do both."

"I…" Smithers' head fell, defeated. "Why do you have to go?"

He opened his mouth to speak, but then found himself thinking about it. Because the people down there needed him? Because he wanted to get the hell out of here? Because he was running on adrenaline and survival instinct?

"I have no idea."

Gordon pushed the door open and stepped out into the corridor, taking extra special care to close the door behind him. After making sure it was secure, he walked down the corridor, surprising himself at how steady and brisk his pace was.

Definitely the suit's influence.

Because he sure as hell wasn't feeling steady.

As expected, the window broke with little effort from his crowbar, and Gordon was through. There were two more red fire doors ahead of him and to the left, thankfully with the release bars on his side. He made his way over and was about to press down on the lever when he noticed a particularly dark corridor on his left that bent back, filled with wooden crates.

He looked back to the doors, and once again to the crates. With a sigh, he moved on to the crates, shoving the smaller boxes aside and climbing over those he couldn't move or tear apart with his crowbar.

On the other side of the crates was a walkway in a particularly large and grey room. On the other side was a reinforced metal fence and gate. As he got closer, Gordon could make out a figure through the fine metal mesh of the fence.

"Stand back."

Gordon froze, and did as he was told. With a loud clang, the gate swung open. Heavy footsteps clomped through the open gateway, and the scientist breathed a sigh of relief as he saw a security guard coming around the corner.

It didn't *quite* occur to him that the guard was pointing a gun at him.

Before it dawned on Gordon to be concerned, the guard smiled and put away his sidearm.

"Hello," he said lightly. "Boy, am I glad to see you. C'mon over."

Gordon walked over, already feeling safer under the guard's friendly watch.

"Don't think I know you. You a scientist?"

Gordon nodded, but didn't elaborate further. Somehow, he doubted that telling the guard he was responsible for this mess would help matters.

The guard shrugged. "Not that it matters. We're all in the same boat now, right? I was hiding out here until I got confirmation that things were gettin' better. Looks like I'm not gonna get it for awhile, huh?" He thrust out a steady hand. "The name's Wheatfield. Harvey Wheatfield. Friends call me Harv."

Good God, the man was built like a bear. Gordon introduced himself, and Harv half shocked him to death by suddenly withdrawing and loudly clapping his hands.

"So! What're you doin' up here? Tryin' to get to the surface?"

The bespectacled scientist nodded. "There are people hurt down below."

"Huh," Harv said, nodding. "Well, the way I see it, we might live longer if we work together. You in?"

Gordon gave the only response that he could, and his new companion grinned.

"Great!"

Harv turned and opened a green metal crate, pulling out a shotgun. He displayed it to Gordon.

"This here's Martha."

Green eyes looked over the weapon. It did indeed have 'Martha' etched on the side.

"Got me through quite a few scrapes, she has."

The only response Harv got was a slightly bewildered nod.

"Now, this is the only big gun I've got. And it's not like I don't trust you with it, but I'm the trained professional here, so… y'okay with that?"

Gordon nodded.

"Well all right!" Harv said, grinning. "I see you've got the standard Glock firearm with you. I'll give ya some extra ammunition."

A sheepishly uttered 'thank you' escaped Gordon's lips as the security guard stuffed clips into his unprepared hands. Harv quickly took the lead.

"Okay. You're tryin' to reach the surface, right?"

Before he could even respond, Harv was leading the way to freedom. Before long they were back at the two red fire doors, and Harv opened them with a gusto usually reserved for the theatre. He quickly stopped in his tracks when he nearly ran into a corridor almost full of metal crates.

Harv looked back to Gordon and winked. "Just give me a sec, Gordy, and I'll have this outta the way."

Gordon cocked an eyebrow.

' *Gordy'?*

He was about to point out that 'Gordy' contained the same amount of syllables as 'Gordon', and therefore served no purpose as a nickname, but decided against it when he saw Harv clamber over one of the bigger crates and disappear into the corridor.

Letting out a deep breath, Gordon idly looked behind him and saw a closed door to a supply closet. He leant against it, letting his crowbar clatter to the floor.

"You okay, Gordy?" a disembodied voice yelled.

"Um… yes. Thank you."

"No problem, Gordy!"

The loud shuffling noise continued, occasionally punctuated with the sound of metal scraping against the tile floor and the odd curse or two.

Gordon closed his eyes.

And quickly opened them again when a zombiefied arm burst from the door behind him and wrapped itself around his neck. It pulled him up off his feet, strangling him.

"Y'know Gordy, it occurs to me I don't know much about you! I mean, I know you're a scientist, and you seem kinda quiet, but still! I think we should get to know each other, don't you?"

Gordon let out a gurgled yelp.

"Good! I'll start, since I like talkin'. I've lived in New York most of my life. Y'know, you hear a reputation about the Big Apple, but seriously, one of the best places in the world for a kid to grow up."

Desperately, Gordon pulled his gun out of its holster and tried to aim it at the zombie. He pulled the trigger, but it didn't budge.

"You learn all the right values there, y'know? Like loyalty, honour…"

He was struggling to breathe now. The gun clattered the floor.

"You okay, Gordy?"

Gordon once again managed a gurgled cry.

"Good! Now, where was I? Oh, yeah. You learn all of the important stuff. Loyalty, honour…"

He thrust his foot down onto the crowbar below, pivoting it upwards. He reached down, his fingertips barely touching the tip of the small end.

"… and trust! I can't tell you how important trust is in any profession. If you can't rely on the people around you to do their jobs, what *can* you rely on, y'know?"

Two fingers finally struggled their way around the base, and soon Gordon had a firm grasp on the weapon. He turned the hooked end around and swung it back through the crack in the door behind him. A disturbingly satisfying crunch sounded from behind the door, followed by a pained moan. The arm's grip loosened, and Gordon wrestled himself free. He whirled on his heel and slammed the crowbar into the head of the zombie again, this time killing it.

It collapsed to the ground with a considerately quiet thud.

Gordon took a moment to catch his breath, picking up his pistol and checking it over as he did so.

The safety was on.

If Barney were here, he probably would have slapped Gordon round the head. Or just laughed at him. Or both.

Harv came back through the doorway. "Did you hear what I said?" He glanced over at the broken closet door and peered inside. He recoiled in surprise, but not disgust. "Jesus shit, Gordy, there's a zombie in there!"

Gordon looked up at him.

"Why didn't you say something?"

"I did."

"… oh."

Gordon cast an expectant gaze on the doorway, and Harv snapped his finger.

"Oh! Yeah, it's done. Let's go through."

Harv charged on ahead with Martha.

After a lingering look at the broken door of the supply closet, Gordon followed.

Harv lead Gordon through so many corridors, the scientist had to wonder whether Harv knew where he was going or not. The ever-continuing epic of his life story did not make the time pass any quicker. Eventually, however, Gordon realised that the corridors were beginning to look slightly different from one another, and soon enough, they were at a thick stone stairway leading strictly up.

"C'mon Gordy, let's go!"

And with that, he bounded up the stairs like a kid running to an ice cream van.

Gordon didn't need much encouragement. However, he stopped in mid stride when he noticed something moving in his peripheral vision.

Slowly and cautiously, Gordon turned and saw a wooden trash receptacle in the corner. Behind it crouched a quivering scientist.

"You can come out," he said.

The scientist's head popped up and then went back down again. As slowly as Gordon's seemingly limitless patience would allow, the scientist stood up. He was carrying a walkie-talkie in his hand.

"I… I just overheard a secure access transmission. Soldiers have arrived, and they're coming to rescue us."

"Well hot damn!" Harv yelled, bounding down the stairs. "The cavalry's comin'."

The scientist shrugged his miniscule shoulders. "Of course, I have my doubts that we'll live long enough to greet them."

"Love the optimism, Doc!" Harv slapped him on the arm. Gordon winced, fearing that the skinny scientist might snap in half if hit too hard.

"You got a name?"

"Um… Oswald Peterson."

"Good to meet ya, Ozzie. This here is Gordy. And I'm Harv."

"Nice to-"

"Well!" Harv said far too cheerfully. "It's good news that they're comin', but I don't think we can count on the cavalry finding us down here. Elevators are out of order… but we can still climb, right?" he said, nudging both Gordon and Peterson in the ribs.

"Please… could you… not do that?" Peterson asked, rubbing his ribs where Harv had nudged him with his elbow.

"Oh. 'Course, sir."

Gordon almost felt sorry for Harv as he sheepishly retreated a pace or two.

Of course, he also wished he had had the fortitude to tell Harv to call him Gordon rather than 'Gordy'.

"All, right then. Gordy, Ozzie… follow me!"

Harv led on up the stairs. Peterson looked over at Gordon. "Has he always been so… obnoxious?"

Gordon shrugged. "I've only known him for twenty minutes."

"Oh, *wonderful*…"

Between Harv's fond reminiscing about his overweight mother and Peterson complaining about his aching ankles, the next half hour turned into a relative day for Gordon. His senses had become so dulled to everything around him that he bumped into Harv's back when the security guard suddenly stopped. Gordon grimaced as his glasses were pushed up, leaving them slightly ajar. He readjusted them as he peered around the hulking security guard before him.

They were at a crossroads. Literally. Gordon didn't know when they had entered an office area, but they were now stood on green carpet. Ahead of them, the corridor veered off to the left, the right, and straight ahead.

Harv looked over his shoulder at Peterson. "Hey, Doc. You might want to wait in the reception office back there."

"All…" Peterson glanced between Harv and door so many times Gordon thought his head might twist off. "… all right."

Gordon turned back to Harv and saw the greasy black shock that Peterson called hair disappear into the reception area out of the corner of his eye. He cocked a sceptical eyebrow at Harv, who put a finger to his lips.

He pointed to Gordon, and then the corridor on the right.

Gordon nodded, indicating that he understood. At least, he hoped he did. He was assuming that Harv wanted him to take care of whatever he thought was hiding around the right corner. Although why Harv couldn't do it, Gordon didn't…

Ah.

That was why.

Harv had his back pressed to the wall that bent around to the left. He looked back to Gordon, and counted down from five with his left hand, Martha firmly grasped his in right.

Gordon pulled out his Glock, making sure the safety was set firmly in the 'off' position.

He glanced back, and Harv had reached 'one'.

With a battle cry that frightened Gordon as much as he assumed it did their enemies, Harv whirled around the corner, letting out a blaze of fury from Martha.

Gordon turned with his Glock, and came face to face with another one of the creatures that had tried to electrocute him in the Test Chamber. It made a quiet gurgling noise that almost sounded like a

question. Suddenly, as though in pain, it ducked its head. Gordon paused, slightly lowering his weapon. Was it supposed to do this?

The creature brought its head back up, the dozen or so red eyes on its face now staring blankly back at Gordon. It began to 'charge up'. Instinctively, Gordon quickly lifted the gun and fired straight through the alien's head, splattering pale green blood along the wall and across the floor. The body fell backwards to the floor.

He stared down at the lifeless lump of brown flesh before him. Another gurgle brought his attention to the far side of the corridor, where another alien was charging. Without thinking, Gordon gripped the Glock with both hands, took aim, and fired three times, hitting the creature in the neck, the shoulder, and the eye. It too fell to the floor, left as lifeless as its comrade.

Deep breath after deep breath followed as Gordon tried to calm himself down. A heavy hand clamped down on his shoulder, sending his heart rate through the roof once again. Gordon whirled on his heel, pointing the Glock at his next attacker.

Harv put his hands up. Martha was securely slung over his shoulder, still smoking slightly.

"Whoa there, Gordy!"

Slowly, Gordon lowered the weapon and walked away, resting against the wall on the other side of the corridor.

The one with the least blood on it.

Harv whistled. "Damn… you've got a talent, Gordy, you know that? They didn't even get a shot off at ya!" He walked over to Gordon and slapped him on the back. "Congratulations!"

The security guard turned around and headed back the way they had come, going to retrieve the good Doctor Peterson.

Gordon just closed his eyes and listened to the sound of his own breathing, resting his head against the wall.

"See, Doc? What'd I tell you? Nothin' to worry about."

"Oh… dear God."

The familiar sound of retching assaulted Gordon's ears, threatening to make him follow suit. Something, perhaps willpower, perhaps tiredness, stopped him from vomiting as well.

Maybe he was just… all vomit-ed out.

"Ugly bastards, huh?"

Gordon instinctually turned around, part of his subconscious obviously not remembering what he had just done. He almost turned away, but the scientist in him couldn't help but be fascinated by the specimen that lay before him.

Curiosity overriding his nausea (for the moment), Gordon knelt beside the body and looked it over. It was wearing green metal bonds around its wrists, ankles and neck. Almost like a…

"Slave…?" Gordon whispered, absentmindedly touching the green metal.

"Say what, Gordy?"

His conscious mind caught up with him, and Gordon quickly pulled his hand away from the corpse of the alien.

"It doesn't matter," he murmured quietly, getting to his feet and rechecking his pistol before moving on.

Harv put his hand on Gordon's shoulder again, this time more gently. "Hey, you okay, Gordy?"

"I'm… fine. I'm just not used to… this."

The security guard smiled. "Coulda fooled me. You're a natural!"

Harv led the way, and Gordon turned back to see what had become of Peterson. He was stood above the dead alien, staring at it intently.

"Peterson."

He didn't reply. At least, not directly.

"A part of me doesn't want to be found. What would the people on the surface do if they found out what we were doing down here?"

Gordon cocked an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

Peterson looked over at Gordon, but seemed to quickly remember something important upon doing so. "It… it doesn't matter. Let's go."

The fragile scientist pushed his way past Gordon, struggling to keep up with Harv's giant strides.

Gordon couldn't stop staring at the bodies.

"Gordy! You comin'?"

He didn't answer.

"Gordy!"

' *A natural'.*

He took a quiet breath, pushed up his glasses, and walked away. "I'm coming."

Gordon turned the corner, only to find his two companions weren't there. After another corner, he came to a wide stone staircase. Assuming they went up there, he followed up with a light jog.

As expected, Harv and Peterson were stood at the top of the stairway, staring down the corridor in front of them. There was an

open elevator door at the end.

With no elevator within.

Harv pointed. "There's a ladder on the other side of the shaft." He turned to Gordon. "You'll have to jump."

"I'll- what?"

He shrugged. "You're the only one who could make it. Ozzie here couldn't make it, and I'm too heavy. *And* you've got that fancy space suit-"

"HEV Mark Four," Peterson corrected.

"-right. So that makes you the best prepared for anything weird you might come across up there."

Gordon took a deep breath, and let his shoulders sag as he exhaled. He nodded. "You're right. You're right."

"Just be glad there's a good run-up, eh?" Harv laughed and clapped Gordon hard on the back. Thanks to the suit, he barely felt it.

Harv's smile faltered slightly. "Don't forget we're down here, all right?"

A nod was the only response Gordon could give. He couldn't think of any words that sounded grand or memorable enough. If Barney were here, he would probably think of a line from a movie.

"There's someone downstairs. A scientist called Smithers. He's in the common room."

Harv nodded. "We'll go and find him."

Well… that was *kind of* noble and heroic.

Gordon prepared to take his running leap when Harv put a hand on his shoulder.

"Once you make it to the ladder, I'll toss you Martha. You'll need her more than I will."

He thought about denying the 'gift', but decided against it. He had his doubts he would even make the jump, so there was really little point. Gordon handed his crowbar to Harv.

"Could you throw that to me, too?"

Harv nodded.

Gordon positioned himself so he was facing the open doorway. As he turned, he could have sworn he saw something out of the corner of his eye through the window of a fire door on his right.

The man with the briefcase…

He turned his head to look.

No-one was there.

"Look, Gordy, if you think about it too much, you'll never make it. Just do it, all right?"

Gordon paused, nodded, and repositioned himself. After making thoroughly sure his glasses were firmly in place, Gordon took off on a dead sprint, his booted feet making a light squeaking noise on the tiled floor as they pounded down on it with increasing frequency.

He reached the ledge and jumped forward, lunging out desperately.

His left hand wrapped around the bottom rung, and the rest of his body swung around and slammed into the wall below it. He suppressed a cry of pain as he felt something tear in his arm.

The HEV suit sprang to life.

" *Warning. Muscle tissue damage. Morphine administered."*

The pain slowly faded, and Gordon swung his right arm around and grabbed on to the ladder.

Once again wishing he had taken up weight training, Gordon managed to pull himself up until his feet were on the bottom rung.

"Nice jump, Gordy! I'm surprised ya didn't hurt yourself, the way ya hit the wall like that!"

Although Harv couldn't see it in the dark light of the elevator shaft, Gordon was giving him an intensely sarcastic glare he usually reserved for Barney.

"Ya ready for Martha? I've tied your crowbar to her with the strap. Be ready now, 'cause I can barely see ya!"

Gordon turned on the HEV flashlight, which was contained just below his ribcage on the left side of the suit.

"Ah, that's better! Okay. Now, you ready?"

Gordon was about to tell Harv he wasn't when the security guard tossed the shotgun to him. Knowing he wouldn't be able to grab the gun itself with his weakened hands, Gordon instead tried to wrap the strap around his arm. Much to his own surprise, he succeeded.

So much for being 'a born klutz'.

"Okay, Gordy. You're set to go! Good luck!" He pointed at the gun that was now dangling from Gordon's shoulder. "I'll want to see her again, y'hear?"

Gordon nodded. He looked over at Peterson.

A cold 'Be careful' was all he got.

He turned and climbed up the ladder, surprised at how well the morphine administration system in the HEV suit worked. Enough to dull the pain, but not enough to affect his reflexes. As he climbed further up, he saw an elevator car above him.

Luckily, the elevator didn't consume the entire elevator shaft. *Un* luckily, it was dangling from a veritable thread of an elevator cable.

As far as Gordon could see, there wasn't any way to reach the higher floors. He climbed up as high above the elevator as he could dare.

Gordon had never been fond of heights. Even relatively small jumps like jumping from over a fence could give him a mild case of vertigo. It always seemed to frustrate Barney when they took part in training sessions together. Then again, Gordon was convinced that Barney was half monkey, so he wasn't too hard on himself.

He kicked off from the wall and tumbled down on to the elevator. It creaked loudly in protest as he slammed down on the roof.

Keeping his movements as small as possible, Gordon unwrapped his crowbar from Martha (good God, *he* was using the name now?) and removed a vent cover. He gently slipped down into the elevator itself.

It groaned again.

Using the crowbar, Gordon wedged it between the doors in front of him.

The elevator groaned louder, and Gordon heard a cable snap. The doors parted slightly, and Gordon managed to wedge himself in the small gap between the doors as the elevator fell back and away from him, narrowly missing his shoulder.

After getting over yet another near miss, Gordon used the crowbar to make more room for himself between the doors, and slipped into the

corridor beyond.

He got to his feet and wrapped the crowbar around Martha once again, putting it on top so that it wouldn't interfere with the pump action mechanism. To test it, he pulled it back. It made a satisfyingly low series of clicking noises as the shotgun cartridge popped out the side.

Red lights were flashing. The damage was more far-reaching than Gordon had realised.

Hopefully the reinforcements would be close by to help. He could definitely use some reassurance right about now.

Because he sure as hell wasn't feeling self assured.

(A/N: Another quick update! It may have something to do with the holidays. Or maybe it's because I'm looking forward to writing "We've Got Hostiles". Which one do you think it is?

Anyway, reviews are very much appreciated.

Incidentally, it's come to my attention that another story in the *Half Life* section also has the title 'The Black Mesa Incident'. To avoid confusion I'm thinking of changing the title of mine. Any suggestions?

Next Chapter: Duty Calls)

Duty Calls

Disclaimer: I don't own *Half Life.*

The Black Mesa Incident

Chapter Eight: Duty Calls

Barney tried to blink the stars out of his eyes. Hell, he was trying to blink away the mother of a headache he had while he was at it.

"Ah… shit…"

Slowly, he forced himself into a sitting position. His thumping brain gradually remembered the circumstances that led to his headache.

"Oh… *shit*…"

He looked around himself urgently, and saw the wrecked remains of the elevator around him, blood covering the walls like wallpaper.

"Uh… Doc…?" Barney pushed himself to his feet. "Professor… what's your name! Can you hear me?"

Silence, except for the blaring alarms. Barney looked at the wreckage around him again. The floor had exploded upwards, as if an earthquake had hit it. Not unreasonable, considering it hit the ground at about two hundred miles an hour. Barney saw how he survived the fall, albeit with said headache.

His corner of the elevator floor had curled up around him, protecting him from the impact as it hit the ground floor. He cast his gaze upwards to the roof and saw a helmet shaped dent there.

Well… it mostly protected him.

Barney removed his helmet and frowned at the all consuming crack.

"'The Ultimate Protection', my ass…" he muttered, looking around the room for any sign of the scientists that had been in the elevator with him.

It was a storage room; that much was obvious from the boxes and barrels littered everywhere. He walked forward to explore, and stopped as his boot landed on something soft and squelch-y.

Slowly, he looked down and saw a severed arm. He back-pedalled as fast his legs could take him, backing into the destroyed elevator. Another soft and fleshy object touched the back of his head, and Barney turned in horror to see one of the deceased scientists hanging from a crack in the elevator roof.

"JESUS MARY CHRIST!"

Barney ran as fast as he could out of the elevator shaft and around the corner, knocking over boxes and falling over barrels as he tried to put some distance between them. He finally stopped when he fell over and hit the side of his already tender head on some metal shelving.

A shaking hand rubbed his sore head.

"Okay, Barney, okay… oookaay…"

He got to his feet and leant against the wall in front of him. He rubbed his temples as he chanted himself to calmness.

"It's no problem, it's not problem… you've seen a dead body before, no biggie. You've seen a dead body before…"

Barney slammed his fists into the wall behind him. "Yeah, on frickin' Grey's Anatomy!"

His hands went up as he surrendered. "Okay… all right… it's *okay* to panic… this is a very stressful situation. You were almost killed in an elevator crash. It's okay. Just call upstairs, and you'll be just-"

A high pitched whirring noise interrupted him. Slowly, he turned to face something that looked like a dog that had been mangled by a bigger dog, run over by a car, and then put back together by cats as some malicious joke towards all dog-kind.

And it was making weird noises while it looked at him.

"Oh. Good."

It began to shake, and the whirring noise became more intense.

Barney put his hands out in front of him. "Uh… nice… uh, thingy… calm down… just…"

It didn't stop. It just kept getting louder.

"Uh… screw it."

He kicked it as hard as he could, sending it careening down the corridor and into some metal shelves. It bounced off them and hit the ground with a thud.

Barney smiled.

Two more came around the corner, wondering how their friend had managed to fly across the room. They spotted him.

Barney stopped smiling. The two creatures came towards him, hopping on their three legs and whirring as they approached.

He decided to use the better part of valour. His boots felts unusually heavy as he tried to sprint down some stairs and towards a secure looking metal door.

A light above it was red.

That was never a good sign.

It also read 'offline'.

Oh, that was even *better* .

He turned the handle and rammed the door to try and get it open. It wouldn't budge.

Barney turned as he heard the pitter-patter of tiny feet behind him.

"Uh… look… guys, I was just-"

They began whirring, in unison this time.

The security guard turned and frantically tried to open the heavy metal door.

They stopped whirring.

Something loud and heavy slammed into Barney's back and the door in front of him, blowing it off its' hinges and forcing it into the corridor beyond.

After waiting for the door to stop sliding along the floor, Barney groaned and held his head, wishing he had left his helmet on.

The whirring started up again.

"Oh, for the love of… could you stop it for one *second?"* he yelled, leaping to his feet and turning towards them.

The whirring stopped.

The creatures looked at each other.

The whirring started up again.

With a roll of his eyes, Barney turned and ran as fast as his legs would take him down the corridor. The space in front of him suddenly opened up into a laboratory area, and Barney skidded to a halt when he instantly recognised the green goop that covered the majority of the floor like icing on a cake.

He glanced back. The creatures weren't far behind him. He looked at the nearest table.

Barney nodded. Yeah. He could make that.

Another quick glance back gave him the impetus he needed to leap over the thick lime green liquid and land on the table with a crash. Test tubes smashed loudly and flat screen monitors fell to the radioactive floor below, crackling and sparking as the liquid came into contact with their systems.

Barney looked back and saw, much to his delight, that the creatures knew that if they tried to pursue, they wouldn't survive very long. After happily flipping them the bird, Barney stood up on the table and took stock of his surroundings. There was a door ahead of him that was *just* within leaping distance.

He was glad Gordon wasn't here. Even *this* jump would have been difficult for the vertigo prone scientist.

But for Barney, it was a piece of cake. In no time he was through the door and up the ladder within. It led to the top of a maze of vents, the whole section presumably used for maintenance.

He crawled his way around, wishing he had thought to practice crawling around on all fours like Gordon had with Dr Kleiner's air vents.

Lucky bastard. He was probably laughing away now, thinking of Barney wedged in some air vent. Not that Barney had a paranoia about his weight or anything. No-siree bob.

He turned a corner and saw Dr Linton huddled there, a flashlight propped up so that it was facing him. The balding scientist looked tired. His comb over didn't look anywhere as neat and tidy as it usually did.

"Hey, doc."

Linton's head whipped up, alarmed. His posture relaxed when he recognised Barney.

"Calhoun… how did you get past the power lock? That must have taken some rather smart work."

"Uh… yeah…"

"Well, it doesn't matter. The only other way out of here is through the canals. If you *do* get to the surface, please don't tell anyone I'm down here." He summoned Barney closer with a 'come hither' motion of his finger.

Warily, Barney came forward.

"I think they're trying to kill us all."

Linton came back and nodded at Barney as though he had just disclosed a top secret piece of information.

"What? You mean the aliens?" He snorted. "Yeah, nice call, Doc."

"No. Not the aliens." He glanced from side to side nervously and pushed up his glasses. "The government."

There was a fairly hefty twitchy thing going on with his left eye. Barney tried to ignore it.

"The government."

"Yes. Why else haven't we heard from rescue services by now?"

Barney didn't have an answer. In truth, he didn't know how long he had been out at the bottom of the elevator shaft. He was also surprised that it wasn't him leaping to these conclusions instead of Linton. It was probably just the adrenaline. Once things had calmed down a bit, he would start thinking like a conspiracy theorist again.

Not conspiracy 'nut', conspiracy *theorist,* thank you very much Dr Eli Vance.

The security guard in him took over. "Doc, you need to clear out. I don't know if I'll be able to come back for you."

Linton gave him a look like he was going to slap him around the head. "Don't you think I know that? I'm safer here than up there, believe me."

"… right. But seriously, I can't just leave you here. It's my job, y'know."

"Do you really think you job means *anything* anymore? This is strictly every man for himself now, Calhoun. Look out for yourself. Stop thinking like a security guard and like a normal human being."

Barney let that comment go. "Well, your theories on the human condition notwithstanding, doc, I've still got to get you outta here."

"No."

"Look, you can't just say no. There are weird… *things* down there that like to kill people."

"Yes, I know. Why do you think I knocked over the toxic canisters and took refuge up here?"

Barney couldn't think of a response to that, so he just changed subjects. "Do you know what these things are, Doc? Or are you as clueless as I am?"

"I know that they don't respond to intimidation tactics. It's kill or be killed."

"Yeah, I kinda figured that…" Barney muttered, rubbing his sore head. Damn, he wished he had a helmet with him. Or some Aspirin. Aspirin would be good.

"They withstood your bullets?" Linton asked, his tone halfway between wonder and fright.

A confused hand came up and scratched (relatively) smartly cropped brown hair. "Bullets…" Barney's eyes widened, and he looked down at his holstered Beretta pistol. "Oh, now how come I didn't remember that was there?" He sighed. "Geez."

"And you're a security guard?"

"Hey, gimme a break, Linton." The scientist twitched at the use of his name. "So far today I've been dropped hundreds of feet down an elevator shaft, given one hell of a headache, and seen two people smashed into four, if you get what I mean."

"I'm sorry, Calhoun."

He waved a dismissive hand. "Ah, forget about it. I'm gonna, at least until I get outta here. Speaking of which…" Barney made his way back to the ladder, and nodded with his head for Linton to follow him.

"Weren't you listening? I'm not coming."

"But-"

"No 'but's. Now get out of here. The canal is where you want to be."

Barney sighed. "Great… more slimy sticky wet stuff to slosh through." He started for the ladder once again, and paused. "Last chance, Doc."

"Go, Calhoun."

"Look, have you at least got some food or something to survive off of?"

"… no."

"Then what the hell are you gonna do? Just sit there and starve to death?"

Linton crossed his arms. "For lack of a better option."

"There *is* a better option. Come with me."

"No."

"Look, I promise you, the government hasn't sent some rogue black ops group to wipe us out, okay? The only thing stopping you from getting outta here alive is you being a stubborn, paranoid ass. Now come on."

"No, Calhoun."

"Do I have to knock you out?"

"You wouldn't dare."

Barney sighed. "Look, I'm not gonna force ya, Doc."

"Then go."

"But I don't want to leave you here to die a slow death."

"You won't be." Linton smiled. "Trust me."

After a staring contest of epic proportions, Barney relented. "All right. But I'm telling them you're down here when I get topside. No-one gets left behind, Doc."

Linton's expression remained blank. "If you say so."

Another sigh escaped Barney's lips. "Goodbye, Doctor Linton."

"Goodbye, Officer Calhoun."

It didn't take Barney as long as he thought to reach the canal through the disgusting (*disgusting)* sewage system, although he did have to shoot quite a few of those weird whirring dog things and some *incredibly* creepy little creatures that tried to attach themselves to his head.

His first meeting with one was the worst. He had entered a storage closet in search of a helmet when some boxes on a shelf above him had shifted suddenly, revealing some kind of… crab… thing.

It had leapt at his head and dug its' claws into his neck, attempting to get a… 'claw-hold' on him. Barney had thrown it off him, pulled out his gun, and pulled the trigger. The little bastard had been ready for him though, and leapt onto the gun as he fired, knocking it out of his hand.

With a smile, he had stepped on it until it died. The smile soon faded when he realised he had smooshed the creature all over his gun.

Barney didn't like those little sons of bitches.

Another creature that had been only too happy to make his acquaintance was about as big as a cow, but nowhere near as docile and stupid. It had two legs, a flat body, and a big display of red tentacles where it's lips should have been. Razor sharp teeth only added to the lovely allure of the creature that Barney had dubbed a 'Bullsquid'.

The thing had first tried to rip off his leg, and, upon realising that was too difficult, had thrown him down the sewage pipe, submerging him in the delicious broth of crap, crap and what tasted like… mmm, crap.

Pumping the thing full of lead while shouting obscenities that would have made Gordon blush didn't seem to help Barney's case with the Bullsquid, which just kept coming at him. It's mouth was slavering with green… stuff, which it even spat at Barney. The force of it had

knocked him onto his back, once again filling his mouth and nose with the lovely sewage water.

At that point, Barney had decided to simply run away from the creature and lock it in there, since the very secure door leading to the sewage system had been within sight.

Barney ascended up the ladder which he hoped would take him to freedom. More dark, dank corridors led out before him.

He couldn't help but sigh as he got to work.

Barney had never been much for walking. Obviously, he had to walk to get places, but he never much liked doing it for recreational purposes. Now, *running* he could understand. It served a functional purpose; to get you physically fit. But walking? For fun? Hell no.

Naturally, Gordon disagreed with him on this point. Barney had mocked him for it on numerous occasions. He thought it sounded like a pickup line for an online dating agency.

' *Hi, my name's Gordon, and I like theoretical physics, reading, and long walks anywhere, not just on the beach.'*

Gordon had been *so* amused.

A yell of pain brought Barney from his fond remembrances, and he looked out across the huge chasm of a room before him to see a security guard on a walkway on the other side. He was stood between what looked like… zombies? They were pulling him to and fro, as though arguing over him like a possession. Barney pulled out his Beretta and took aim.

The zombies released their captive, who swayed perilously close to the edge of the walkway before falling in altogether.

Looking bored, the zombies wandered off in different directions.

His hands shaking in a bitter mix of fear and anger, Barney slowly put his gun away, and continued on.

Don't think about it, just get to the surface. You can deal with it later.

Jesus. If trained professionals were getting torn apart by these things, how were others in the facility doing?

How was Gordon doing?

He sighed, not only out of concern for his friend, but also because he had to once again submerge himself in water.

Ah, well. At least this was streaming water, so he'd be concentrating on fighting the current too much to notice the smell. And the taste. And the nausea.

"Bleah."

He dove in as gracefully as he could manage. Which was to say, not very much.

The current took him into a large cylindrical chamber, where a ladder was conveniently placed. Barney managed a wry smile at the thought of the Black Mesa design team planning for this kind of emergency.

' *Well, maybe a security guard will dive in and need help getting out.'*

He looked up. He could see the sky through the grated metal ceiling so far above him. The hole in the middle didn't hurt, either.

Barney smiled. It was good to see the sky again.

As he hauled himself up the ladder, Barney heard footsteps above him, and two burly looking military types wandered over to the hole in the ceiling, carrying what looked like hefty bags on their shoulders. They both looked down.

A grin slid across Barney's lips as he reached the top of the ladder, which was a floor below the soldiers. Finally, *finally*, the cavalry had arrived. Barney put his hand up, ready to call for help.

His call was caught in his throat when he saw what they were carrying on their shoulders.

Security guards.

One grunted with effort as he tossed one down the hole and through the one on Barney's level.

" *Damn*… these civvies are getting *heavy* ."

Another snorted loudly and spat down the hole. "Yeah. Why are we on disposal duty anyway? Just because Shephard's team didn't make it, we have to do all the crap jobs?"

The other sighed. "Well… let's get on with it."

Barney backed up to the wall, hiding himself in the shadows.

Holy Jesus crap Jesus crap. They were here to kill them. The military had shown up to kill them. To silence them. Hundreds of hour's worth of government conspiracy reading rushed back to Barney.

Linton had been right. Dr Linton, with the really twitchy left eye.

Dammit. Linton was going to be so smug for the few seconds he was actually going to live before the military killed him. His last thoughts would be *'I was right, Barney. Ha ha.'*

And then they would blow his brains out, just for being there when it happened. Linton didn't even know anything.

Jesus Mary Mother of God.

Barney looked over to his right and saw an open corridor, a sign beside it reading 'Surface Access'.

He thought for a moment. Did he even want to go to the surface now? Should he just stay down here, fortify his position and hold out for as long as he could?

Screw that. He wanted out. After a quick glance up to make sure the soldiers hadn't spotted him, Barney turned and ran down the corridor as silently as he could.

Another ladder stood before him, this one leading to a straight view of the sizzling New Mexico sky.

Barney got a firm grip on the first rung, and took a few deep breaths before he began climbing. Maybe there were others who wanted to get out.

It didn't really matter.

He was a security guard, dammit. He was gonna secure shit.

(A/N: If you think Barney's being a bit too flippant in the face of stressful situations… I say poo on you. He's the type (in my eyes) who would make light of something to make it easier to deal with in his head. I'm sure once he's out of danger, he'd do some serious thinking about what happened in the Black Mesa Facility. But he's a trained security guard. It's what makes his reactions different from Gordon's and eventually Adrian's (when the sleepy guy wakes up, of course).

Anyway, reviews, please.

Next Chapter: "We've Got Hostiles")

We've Got Hostiles

Disclaimer: I don't own *Half Life.*

(A/N: As always, I owe Hhgbh a lot of favours for beta-ing once again. Maybe I could send him a cheque in the mail?)

The Black Mesa Incident

Chapter Nine: "We've Got Hostiles"

Alarms were bad things. It was something that had, strangely enough, been drummed into Gordon when he was going through training courses and the like. Hell, even before he was old enough to read (which was roughly in diapers), Gordon had known that blaring noises and flashing red lights meant *'Go Away, This is Bad'.*

And yet, here he was, a pistol holstered by his side, and wielding a shotgun called Martha with a crowbar tied to the top of it.

And he had been such a quiet boy.

Well, there *was* that time he had built a propane powered tennis ball cannon and smashed five windows, wrecked two cars, and knocked three people unconscious in the middle of the street, but everyone assumed that was just a freak accident.

He crept through the corridor, thankful for a fully lit room, despite the flashing lights. No little things could jump out at him here and scare the daylights out of him.

A scientist leapt out from around the left corner, instantly disproving that theory. The white haired scientist didn't notice Gordon, instead intent on banging on the window of an office in front of him.

"For God's sake, open the Silo doors! They're coming for us, it's the only way out!"

He backed away from the window, horrified. "Oh my God, we're doomed!"

Almost falling over, the scientist ran away from Gordon, still not noticing his presence. He ran straight down the corridor. Without warning, an explosion claimed the scientist, blowing him to pieces.

Gordon stepped forward, his hand outstretched in a futile gesture of assistance. He slowly went forward, his eye catching in the office window that was on his right. There was nobody inside. At least, not anymore. An open air vent at the back of the small office showed blood splattered everywhere.

He waited for the wave of nausea. None came. Still feeling slightly numb, Gordon looked around the room, and saw a huge reinforced door behind him. On it, in giant white letters was written 'Silo D'.

The missile silo was presumably for launching observation satellites and the like. But why did that scientist want to get in there so badly?

Beside the silo door were two recharge stations for his HEV suit; one for *his* health, and one for the electrically hardened armour that surrounded the suit. The more current poured through it, the more the charge could repel. Gordon hadn't come across any before now, so he decided to take advantage of it.

While he put his hand on the recharge socket (as had been banged into his head in countless training sessions) Gordon wondered if it was a good or bad thing that he was becoming less and less fazed by the carnage around him.

Being a scientist, he had a rudimentary knowledge of medicine. And rudimentary meant *rudimentary* . Hell, even *Barney* knew more about it than him. So the sight of blood wasn't something he was used to, although he could handle it. He certainly wasn't prepared for the sheer amount he had come across in the past few hours, though. Who could be, except for a trained Marine or the like?

His suit made a negative sounding noise, and Gordon checked the Heads Up Display at the bottom of his vision. His suit, and his health, were now at one hundred percent. Although how the suit knew when he was exactly one hundred percent was beyond him. He understood the scientific principles behind it, of course, but psychologically it was quite a different conundrum.

He shook his head and continued on, not looking forward to getting past the exploded remains of the scientist down the hallway.

One particularly large scorch mark covered one side of the corridor, while the other was pasted in a hard, flaky, deep red colour.

Dried blood.

Maybe it was the fact that it was from a distance; that was why Gordon wasn't being affected by the blood. But when he could see it, touch it, smell it…

Well, at least the thought of it wasn't making him ill anymore.

Even though he hadn't had much experience with weapons outside of the training room (and the aforementioned tennis ball cannon), Gordon recognised what had happened in the corridor; a trip mine.

Which means that there were people here, laying traps.

It wasn't surprising. He was pretty sure that Harv downstairs would be doing the same thing right now if he had any trip mines.

Gordon turned around the corner and entered a large storage area. The huge, expansive area was refreshing, to say the least.

He stopped short of entering the large room and looked down. A small red laser lay within a few millimetres of his extended foot.

A laser trip mine wasn't unheard of, either. Although…

Green eyes scanned the room from behind the protective lenses of Gordon's thick-rimmed glasses.

There.

A portably weapons turret was placed in the center of the room, facing the corridor that Gordon now occupied.

His breathing shaky, Gordon took a step away from the red laser before slowly taking one big step over it.

Then the other foot…

He made it, and fell over in relief. He wasn't sure what kind of sensors the turret had, so he decided to opt on the side of caution and crawl beneath it. Of course, if it activated and he was on the floor trying to get past it, then he wouldn't be able to move fast enough to stop himself from being blasted away.

But then again, if he-

A green burst of light in front of him took the decision out of his hands. One of the 'headcrab' creatures popped out of the green light and landed on the red laser.

The turret came to life with a high pitched whine and practically tore the headcrab inside out with a hail of bullets.

Gordon scrambled to hide behind a wooden crate, hoping the turret didn't detect his movements.

It did.

Within a few seconds, the box was in pieces, and Gordon was running to take cover behind another crate. He landed with a thud, hoping that this box would hold against the bullets. He took a quick moment to glance at the orange and black marked crate he had taken shelter behind.

It was marked 'Explosives'.

In a move so fast it surprised even him, Gordon turned and kicked the box away, towards the turret. As if on cue, it exploded, blowing the turret across the room and into the wall on the other side. It fell on its side, sparks flying from all directions as it died.

Gordon collapsed onto his back with a huge sigh.

He sat up, looking around the room. Something caught his eye in the distance, behind one of the large green storage crates on the other side of the room.

For a reason he didn't quite comprehend, Gordon crawled over to the strange shape, which began to come into focus as he slowly made his way over to it. It occurred to him about halfway there that it would be faster to walk, but for some reason, he felt safer crawling.

Must be all the air vents.

It was a black boot. A pretty thick one, come to that. Gordon made his way around the crate, and saw the dead body of a heavily armoured soldier lying before him, blood still trickling from his slit throat.

And there was the nausea.

And the vomit.

Questions filled Gordon's spinning head. That looked like something done with a knife. Were the soldiers here to save them or not? Why had this one had his throat cut? Was he trying to do something the others didn't like? Did a security guard do this because the soldier was trying to kill him?

An open doorway on the other side of the room somehow focused Gordon's addled brain.

One thing at a time.

First: Collect Martha.

Second: Get through door.

Third: Get to the surface.

Fourth: Ask questions.

Steps one and two were easy enough. Step three led him through another fire door and narrowly past two more turrets. Whoever put them here definitely didn't want anyone getting past. Something else Gordon had learnt: blue laser trip mines were explosive.

Two scientists stood beside a fire door, both looking too petrified by the inactive turrets to go on.

One, a black scientist whose nametag identified him as Johnson, was practically caked in sweat. Even the underarms on his lab coat were drenched.

"I can't believe this. Who would put these here?" he asked Gordon frantically.

He wasn't listening, though. Gordon's attention was attracted to a walkway at the top of the room the fire door led to. There, stood on the walkway, was the man in the suit.

Without so much as a nod of acknowledgement, he straightened his tie and turned away, walking out of sight. Careful that he didn't trip any red or blue laser trip mines, Gordon scrambled past the two scientists, their pleas for help blocked out by Gordon's rabid curiosity.

He was responsible for this. Gordon knew it. And he would catch the bastard and make him pay for all he had put Gordon through. He scaled the ladders leading up to the walkway at almost superhuman speed. His foot reached the walkway the man had been standing on.

"Don't leave us here!"

It was the other scientist, a middle aged woman, who let out the plea.

Gordon froze. He closed his eyes and sighed before turning to look down at them.

"Do you want to come along?"

She almost nodded, but Johnson stopped her. "No. You go and get help, and we'll wait right here."

She looked at him in amazement. "Are you mad? We've got to get out of here! Those turrets weren't put up by us, you know!"

"No, they were put up by Black Mesa Security! They have our logo on them."

"Oh, and it's unheard of that they might have taken them from our storage supply depot?"

"Who are 'They', Thorpe? The government? A government *conspiracy*, perhaps? Oh, yes, very likely."

Thorpe shook her head and rolled her eyes. "Do what you want, Michael. I'm getting out of here."

One step forward was all it took. Gordon thrust out a hand. "Stop."

She looked up at him questioningly, both herself and Johnson behind her looking equally horrified. Gordon silently pointed downwards.

Her breathing shallow, Thorpe slowly looked down and saw a practical maze of blue laser trip mines.

Looking at the complexity of it from above, Gordon wondered how he was able to circumnavigate them all so easily.

Barney *had* always said he was a lucky bastard. That was probably it.

"It'd probably be best if you stayed here."

Numbly, Thorpe began to nod, but then shook her head defiantly. Slowly, she made her way through the lasers. Although he protested (rather loudly), Johnson soon followed. After what felt like a few hours, they finally reached Gordon's walkway.

Thorpe smiled at him, breathless. "Thank you for waiting."

But Gordon was already gone, intently pursuing the suit and briefcase man.

He was gone. A stairway turned abruptly left in front of Gordon and turned around halfway to the ground, like a fire escape in an apartment building. At the bottom of the room in front of him, Gordon saw a grated door in front of a supply elevator.

The surface.

A soldier stood beside it, semi-automatic weapon held at the ready.

Thorpe and Johnson bumped into him, Gordon's boots making a loud noise against the metal surface of the stairs.

The soldier's head whipped up, taking aim with his rifle.

Instinctively, Gordon took cover. Johnson, however, was nowhere near as cautious. He couldn't thunder down the stairs fast enough. Thorpe stayed behind with Gordon, her hand on his shoulder as they both watched.

"Rescued at last! Thank God you're here!" he said happily, coming to a stop in front of the elevator, and the soldier.

"I bet," the hulking soldier replied, his voice muffled by the mask he wore. He shoved the rifle into Johnson's stomach and fired, blowing several holes through him.

"Oh my God, Michael!" Thorpe tried to get up, and Gordon pulled her straight back down again with an assurance he didn't feel.

The solider opened fire on the metal platform on which they were crouched, the bullets easily denting the comparatively weak metal. Gordon shoved Thorpe back onto the walkway and kicked back himself, landing on top of the hysterical scientist.

"Oh My God, oh my God…" she repeated, tears making her words sound like little more than burbled noises.

Gordon wished that he could comfort her. But the sound of heavy footsteps quickly marching up the stairway attracted his attention to the platform before them. Getting to his feet, he pulled Martha from off his shoulder and took aim, pumping the shotgun to be sure it was ready.

The marching slowed to an agonisingly measured creep upon hearing the noise of Martha loading.

The bespectacled scientist tried to control his breathing, but it didn't really work. Sweat dribbled down into his eyes, and he desperately tried to blink it away. He wanted so much to take off his glasses and wipe his forehead.

More footsteps. Louder this time.

Silence.

The soldier jumped from around the corner and fired at Gordon, hitting him in the stomach.

Gordon fired off one inaccurate shot from Martha before falling on his back. But at such close range, it was enough.

The spray of bullets from the shotgun ripped into the soldier, and while they didn't penetrate his body armour, the force of the impact blew him over the edge and down the two stories below him. Gordon

didn't hear him hit the floor; he was too busy tenderly holding his stomach as he got to his feet. The suit's electrical charge may repel the bullets, but it certainly didn't stop the pain. It felt like he had been kicked in the gut. Several times.

He put an uncomfortable hand on Thorpe's shoulder.

"Do you know any medicine?"

She looked up at him, eyes bleary from weeping. "W… what?"

He grabbed her by the shoulders, hefting her to her feet. "Do you know any medicine?"

"I… some, but-"

Without waiting for another word, Gordon yanked her along, running down the stairs at breakneck speed. He shielded her still frantic eyes from the sight of the dead soldier at the bottom of the stairs. He *would* have had to fall at the foot of the stairs.

Gordon frowned. Did he just make fun of a dead person?

Johnson was on the floor, already surrounded by a pool of his blood. Gordon looked at Thorpe.

"Can you help him?"

"I… I don't know. I'll try, b-but… you need to-"

He nodded, pointing to the elevator. "-get to the surface. I'll bring help. I won't leave you here." The first smile he had allowed since the resonance cascade appeared on his face. It was an accomplishment, regardless of how small it was. "I promise."

She nodded, but was quickly distracted when Johnson made a strangled gurgling sound, blood burbling from his mouth.

"Just go, please!"

Without further delay, Gordon pushed the button next to the supply elevator, waiting for the grate to open. It did so, and he stepped inside, readying Martha again. He reached for the button to go up, briefly considering going back to get the dead soldiers' semi-automatic rifle.

One glance at the dying Johnson changed his mind.

He pushed the button, and the elevator rumbled to life before slowly ascending.

Voices echoed down the short elevator shaft, almost drowned out by the all encompassing sound of machinery at work throughout the facility.

"Don't shoot! I'm with the science team!"

A deafening blast of machine gun fire was the only response. Gordon slammed his back to the wall, cocking Martha in a disturbingly instinctive way. Slowly, the elevator gave way to the room above Gordon. He was facing the wall, the corridor going to the left ahead of him.

After another mechanical grunt, the elevator stopped, and the gates slid open for Gordon.

Random blurbs of radio chatter trickled into Gordon's ears, but for the most part he had no idea what he was doing. It seemed like they hadn't noticed the elevator. That was good.

Gordon took deep breaths as quietly as he could, his gloved hands protectively nursing their way up and down the weapon they held.

For a moment, he considered simply hiding until the situation blew over.

A quick glance below him brought back the memory of Johnson's evisceration at the hands of the soldier.

He pushed up his glasses and whirled around the corner, holding his shotgun at the ready.

One soldier was stood directly in front of him, his hulking back to Gordon.

Gordon wondered what to do. Was he excused from the whole 'honour' thing if he shot him now? In the back?

With a bored groan, the soldier turned around, solving Gordon's dilemma for him. Before the soldier's brain even registered Gordon, the scientist had fired at him. The spray of bullets ripped through his head, sending a far too long trail of blood and gore down the corridor behind him.

His radio crackled to life.

" *Shit! We've got hostiles!"*

Gordon understood that. Left with little else to do, he quickly moved over the body of his victim and down the corridor, which opened up into another large warehouse of a room. Metal walkways ran just above Gordon's head and around the room.

A rifle poked its way over walkway in front of him, pointing down at Gordon's face. The soldier wielding it hesitated for just a moment before firing.

With a speed that surprised him, Gordon dove forward and underneath the walkway, cocking Martha as he went. He pointed the shotgun upwards, aiming for where the soldier would be. He fired.

One.

Reload.

Two.

Reload.

Three.

Reload.

The red shotgun shells rattled to the floor with a hollow noise that seemed far quieter than it had when Harv had used the weapon.

His breathing was erratic. He didn't dare close his eyes to try and calm himself. For God's sake, he was being shot at. That entitled him to feel anything *but* calm.

Gordon felt a little better at that revelation of logic.

Martha ready, Gordon got to his feet, his legs quivering as he did so. He readied himself to slowly edge his way out from under the walkway. A quiet tapping noise behind him drew his attention around, where he saw a small pool of blood falling, the source of said blood coming from above him.

With a bit more assurance, Gordon poked his head out the other side of the walkway and came face to face with the soldier. Or face to boot, depending on whether one found that sort of thing amusing or not.

Gordon didn't.

Something about the dead body disturbed him. That was, besides the obvious 'it's a dead body' factor, which Gordon had adapted to remarkably quickly. It was that adaptation that worried him the most. The way he had gone from lowly scientist to clumsy killer was difficult to deal with, to say the least.

And worse, he seemed to be getting better at it.

It was a relief and a worry at the same time.

Some stairs leading up to the walkway attracted Gordon's eye, and he made his way over warily, almost constantly circling on the spot to

make sure there were no other surprises waiting to make an entrance.

Finding none, he walked up the stairs and onto the walkway, wincing as he eventually came to the dead body and stepped over it. He stopped.

Ahead of him was an open secure fire door leading out onto another walkway in a darkened chamber. Gordon remembered them from his Hazard Course training. If the fire alarm button beneath the glass box beside the door was smashed, the metal fire door would contain the area from further damage.

In theory.

To his left was a green army supply crate, presumably with ammunition. Normal, unmarked crates surrounded it, stacked around it like they were guarding it.

A voice in the back of Gordon's head sounding suspiciously like Harv advised him to check inside. He did so, finding that the box was almost empty except for some grenades and some 9mm clips. At least, Gordon thought they were 9mm. He didn't really know what he was doing.

Loud footsteps echoed off the metal walkway. Gordon quickly dropped himself into the ammunition crate and closed it as silently and quickly as he could.

Which wasn't much.

In the close, warm darkness of the crate, Gordon could only hear and feel his own breathing. It sounded far too loud in his ears.

"Oh, shit…"

"What the fuck happened?"

"Check the area! Go!"

Without another word, the soldiers went on their way. All Gordon could hear was the shuffling of boots and the slight tinkling noises of the various zips on their fatigues.

A crate near him groaned in protest as it was pushed aside. Gordon's fingers seized up around Martha.

Another crate slowly moved.

With a shaking hand, Gordon slowly pulled his crowbar away from the shotgun.

The crate opened.

"There's a dead civvie over here! Think he did it?"

The red beret wearing soldier above Gordon was looking in the direction of the voice as he opened the crate. He hadn't noticed Gordon yet.

With a firm grip on the crowbar, Gordon slammed the sharp end into the back of the soldier's neck, felling him with one blow.

Unfortunately for Gordon, the soldier managed to scream loudly before falling either unconscious or dead. Gordon didn't have time to figure out which as the crates around him were ripped to pieces by machine gun fire.

Keeping his head down and allowing his HEV suit to take the brunt of the attack, Gordon shot towards the fire door. He slammed the bloodied tool into the glass, hitting it against the red button beneath at the same time.

A bullet struck the back of Gordon's leg, hitting him with the force of a thrown brick. The scientist fell through the doorway and onto the walkway, both Martha and the crowbar slipping from his grasp. Heavy footsteps behind him made Gordon turn around. He wished

he hadn't. Two soldiers were running towards him, resembling two charging bulls.

Well, bulls with sub machine guns.

Gordon assumed that they had surmised that their bullets couldn't penetrate his suit, and were coming to finish the job up close and personal.

A quick glance upwards told him that the fire door was still coming down. It was about a quarter of the way down.

With instincts he didn't even acknowledge, Gordon pulled out his Glock pistol and fired his last shots at the first soldier, hitting him in his left kneecap once and the other twice. He fell forward screaming, tumbling to the floor in a heap.

The other soldier didn't even stop to check on him. He reached Gordon before the scientist could reload, kicking the pistol out of his hand.

The fire door was halfway down now. A firm hand grasped him by the ankle and pulled him into the path of the heavy metal door so that his midsection was in the middle of the doorway.

"Being shot is too good for you, fucker." His words were distorted by the gas mask he wore, the reflective green eyepieces making him seem more alien than the creatures Gordon had been killing for hours.

Door almost to his belly now. Think.

Desperately, Gordon looked up at the walkway in the chamber. Ropes dangled seemingly uselessly from the ceiling, their source obscured by the darkness that engulfed much of the room.

With a quick movement, Gordon kicked the soldier in the chin and grabbed the rope with his hands. For some reason, it felt slick in his

gloved hands. He wrapped it around his wrist for better leverage and pulled.

The soldier's hand remained steadfast on his leg, which was slowly being pressed down on by the metal door above it.

Suddenly, the rope yanked him up and away from the door, pulling the soldier's arm underneath the fire door as it clanged into place.

The dismembered forearm maintained its' grip on Gordon's ankle before he frantically kicked it off.

Gordon thanked God that the doors were sound proof. He didn't want to even *think* about the kind of pain the soldier was going through.

He frowned. The rope was still going up. Still shaking, Gordon tried to unwrap the moist rope from his wrist. It almost felt like…

Saliva.

His head whipped up, and he mentally activated his flashlight. Above his head was some small red organism about the size of a barrel that had latched itself onto the roof. It looked like a mouth in the ceiling, with teeth both on the inside and the outside. The grey rope that Gordon clung to for dear life not a few seconds ago protruded from the center, pulling him towards it.

The tongue was still wrapped around his right wrist, and Gordon panicked as he felt warm, sticky saliva on his short cropped hair.

Without a thought, Gordon threw his right arm into the creature. Even through the suit, Gordon felt the creature's teeth trying to penetrate the electrically charged shield of his HEV suit.

Something akin to a baby voicing its' displeasure at bad food emerged from the creature as it bit its' own tongue.

The creature released him, and Gordon smiled.

His smile quickly disappeared as he looked down. The walkway was three stories below him.

Faster than he would have thought possible, Gordon landed with a firm, solid clang on the metal.

The walkway didn't give an inch.

A series of quiet beeps came from the HEV suit, echoing in the darkness around him.

" *Warning. Minor fracture detected."*

Gordon groggily turned his head until his nose was pressing against the cool metal. "Minor…?"

He didn't want to know what the suit considered major.

Slowly, Gordon crawled his way around the walkway, picking up all the weapons he dropped and collecting them up as best he could, occasionally stopping to sit in a ball on the floor and hold his bruised body. He just thanked God Barney weren't here; the security guard would have kicked him in the ass and told him to stop complaining several times by now.

If the situation were reversed, Barney would be far more vocal about his complaints, and Gordon would lend a hand to his friend, naturally.

The way he was feeling now, though? He would probably kick him.

In ten minutes, the weapons were collected up.

As he moved on into the adjoining corridor, Gordon thought about how nice it would be to kick something without it trying to eat, shoot, or stab him. An almost fond sigh escaped his lips.

The corridor moved up like a ramp, another military crate awaiting him at the top. On the wall at the end was a sign that read 'Cargo

Elevator Access'.

He felt like turning back and letting the tentacle monster eat him. With a sigh, he checked his weapons (even though the majority of the checks were simply things he had seen done by Barney or in action movies; he had no idea what purpose they served), stealthily cocked them, and moved on up.

Radio chatter came in from the right. Gordon dropped to the floor and continued forward on his belly, keeping Martha in front of him so she wouldn't clatter noisily on the floor.

Gordon frowned. 'She'?

He reached the end of the corridor and carefully, *carefully* poked his head around. Another walkway lay before him, this one running around the length of the pale grey room in front of him. The radio chatter was coming from inside, below the walkway.

Nervously, Gordon glanced around the corridor and at the military crate before moving on. He paused, and looked back to the crate.

Grenades.

Interesting.

Hoping he had stumbled across a good idea, Gordon snatched up as many as he could, and pulled out the pin of each one and threw them systematically into different corners of the room, hoping that his throwing arm was good enough to make sure they ricocheted off the walls and covered a good area of the room.

Gordon threw himself back down the corridor and covered his head.

There was silence for a moment, even from the radios.

" *Shit!"*

The incredible din would have deafened Gordon if not for the unique way his head had been totally concealed and tucked away in his arms. He was pretty sure he looked ridiculous, but when all he could hear of over a dozen grenades exploding was a few very loud thuds, he didn't particularly care. He'll tell Barney he ran down a corridor with the explosion following him.

A dead silence followed.

The scientist hauled himself to his feet, the HEV's morphine administration system slowly doing its' job on his bruised and battered body.

He crept around the corner, no longer on his belly but still hunched over, his fingers clenched around Martha like she were a lifeboat.

Gordon frowned. 'She'? Again?

Acrid smoke wafted up to his nostrils, making his eyes water beneath his thick rimmed glasses. There was another smell mixing with the smoke, and Gordon tried not to think about it.

Inch by inch, he edged his way to the walkway and peered over the side. Two soldiers were lying on the ground, their machine guns tossed away haphazardly as they were blown away. One had a leg missing.

And Gordon was the cause of it. There was another soldier back there, behind that fire door, without an arm. Gordon had done that, too.

What the hell was he turning into?

His thoughts drifted back to the dying Johnson, Gordon's last mental image of him bleeding to death on the floor, Thorpe crouched over him and desperately trying to keep him alive.

Gordon's jaw set, and he set off around the walkway to the stairs that were beneath him. He would have to go around the perimeter of the room in order to get to them.

The sudden roar of machine gun fire made him drop to the walkway.

Gordon gripped Martha and tried to look over the sides of the walkway without actually putting his head in any danger.

He pushed his glasses up his nose.

Something landed between his legs with a metallic thud. He didn't even have to look down to know he had to jump. Gordon scrambled to his feet, grabbed the guardrail of the walkway, and tossed himself over, aiming for one of the larger crates beneath him.

The grenade exploded behind him, and Gordon felt the heat searing the back of his head as he easily fell through the wood of the large crate and into the polystyrene packing material within.

No gunfire followed. The soldier must have thought Gordon was blown up. He tried to move around in the crate without making noise. The loud squeak of the polystyrene curls around him did their best to foil his well prepared plan. He stopped moving, hoping the soldier didn't hear anything.

The sound of a machine gun being cocked was instantly recognisable.

Gordon put his head down and covered it with his hands. Bullets rained through the thin wood of the crate, lashing at his back like paintballs being shot through a cannon.

Light poured in through the bullet holes in the crate, and the polystyrene poured out. Gordon, wincing at the pain of the onslaught of bullets on his HEV suit, prepared Martha. He checked his Heads Up Display.

HEV power was at sixteen percent.

He was at eighty.

Funny. He didn't feel like he was at eighty percent.

The bullets stopped, and Gordon heard a machine gun clip clatter to the floor. He turned with Martha and burst through the polystyrene, slamming into the soldier stood in front of the crate and ramming him into the wall behind him. He tried to grab a hold of Gordon, but he had spent too much time slipping out of the hands of schoolyard bullies to allow himself to be caught by such a clumsy manoeuvre. Gordon backed up, took aim, and fired.

There was nothing left of the soldier's head after that.

Without stopping, Gordon looked around the room. There, on his left, stood the cargo elevator. A sign beside it read 'Surface Access'. The two sweetest words in the English language.

Gordon slapped his palm onto the button, and the gate in front of the heavy duty elevator slid open. He stepped inside and pressed the button with the arrow pointing upwards. In the warehouse above his head, Gordon could see sunlight pouring in, reflecting brightly off the metal struts and supports in the elevator shaft.

The elevator started moving.

And then Gordon remembered.

He had just shot someone's head off. Again.

Strangely, he didn't throw up. He didn't feel nauseous. He didn't even feel guilty or angry. He was numb. There was nothing there.

He had killed a possible seven men and wounded two others, all in the space of twenty minutes.

And he couldn't even bring himself to feel nauseous.

He was a disgusting excuse of a human being.

The deafening thrum of a helicopter's blades filled the air. A high pitched whine followed. The pitch of the whine rapidly fell until an explosion sounded in the distance. The elevator shook from the explosion.

He reached the warehouse floor, and the gate opened. Gordon slumped to the metal elevator floor, a hopelessness replacing his sorrow. Even the surface wasn't safe any more. What was the point now?

Strangely enough, his brain didn't reply. He was all tapped out, mentally and physically. The surface had been his *purpose* . He had used that purpose to justify everything he had seen and done; it allowed him to ignore the atrocities around him and focus. But now… what was there?

He stared at his gloved hands, and a random memory from the night before rolled into Gordon's mind. At Eli's house, about to have dinner. And baby Alyx grasping his finger, looking up at him with those curious, innocent eyes. He wondered how Alyx was doing right now. If she was safe. If Eli had managed to get out of the lab and find Alyx and Azian.

The final words of his good friend echoed in his head.

" *Just be safe out there, all right?"*

He remembered Harv's ever present grin faltering. *"Don't forget we're down here, all right?"*

He remembered Johnson, bleeding to death on the floor.

If he stopped, they would never get out. He had to keep going. The military weren't going to help them, but Gordon could find someone who would. It was an incredibly slim, snowball in hell's chance… but it was worth it.

Barney's voice chimed in on Gordon's inner conflict.

" *Anythin's better than watchin' you sit around and mope."*

With a sudden thrust, Gordon was on his feet. He tightened the strap holding the crowbar to Martha, cocked her and the Glock, and pushed up his glasses.

He stepped out into the warehouse with a newfound assurance, wincing slightly as the hot New Mexico sun glared through the open loading door on his left.

Said assurance disappeared as another bomb dropped, exploding out of Gordon's sight, but making the warehouse tremble nonetheless.

Bullets zipped past him, one barely grazing his nose. He ran back into the shaft and put his back to the wall. Whirling around, Gordon fired Martha blindly into the light, checking the area as he did so. There was what looked like an electrified fence running the right side of the loading bay, and presumably the left as well. A guard tower stood halfway between the fence, which had curled barbed wire on the top.

Gordon wondered whether the HEV suit could handle being electrocuted as he took cover from a further shower of bullets that embedded itself in the wall opposite him.

He closed his eyes and mentally checked what he had just seen. There were no doors, and no visible ways for him to get over the fence. The only thing he could do was run out into the open and hope there was a door, pipe or vent that could take him back down into the facility. And from there, he could find some other way to the surface that wasn't compromised. He sure as hell couldn't go back with soldiers coming after him; the elevator was far too slow. They could just throw a few grenades down on him and watch him explode into tiny pieces.

He took some short, sharp breaths before he leapt to his feet and, with his head down, sprinted out of the shaft, out of the warehouse, and into the blinding sun.

Good God, the *heat* .

The bullets bruising and knocking him every which way didn't help either, of course, but Gordon was becoming accustomed to them. The heat was *new.*

Stacks of military crates were dotted around the loading area. Although he could sure as hell hear it, Gordon couldn't see the helicopter, and he wasn't about to waste time looking for it.

A small bunker stood in the middle of the loading grounds. With a door. A sweet, lovely, beautiful door.

A heavy hand clapped onto his arm, twisting him around. With a yell, Gordon swung Martha into his face, smashing through the monstrous gas mask and knocking him to the ground.

The HEV suit beeped. It was out of power. Gordon quickly checked the display as he ran towards the bunker. He was at sixty seven percent.

The whine of another bomb sounded above him. He slammed shoulder first into the door and let out another yell as he fell down the small shaft before him. As he slammed into the hard stone ground, he noticed the ladder. In a display of defiance and stubbornness, Gordon put a limp hand on the bottom rung of the ladder.

An explosion sounded above him, caving in the bunker at the top of the ladder and sending chunks of debris down on him. Gordon rolled out of the way, letting the avalanche of rocks and cement hit the ground, sending a churning cloud of dust into his face.

He sneezed.

Irritably, he pushed up his glasses and wiped them with his black gloved hands.

Just made the smudges worse.

With simultaneously shaky and angry movements, Gordon pressed down on his knees and forced himself to his feet, heading down the darkened corridor he was now in and towards the light. Gordon surmised he was in a maintenance access tunnel, which would hopefully lead him to the ventilation system. And where there was ventilation, there were ventilation ducts.

A small cubby-hole on his right revealed both HEV and Medical recharge stations. Further on the right was a vent cover. It was like a small Christmas in the middle of… well, in the middle of being the subject of a military hunt.

Within a few minutes, Gordon was recharged and crawling through another dark, cramped ventilation duct. Of course, he wasn't expecting a ventilation duct to be *spacious*, but…

He turned a corner, and the grumbling thought was pushed from his head when he came across a grate. Cautiously, he peeked over and through it. Two soldiers stood below him.

"I killed twelve dumbass scientists, and not *one* of them fought back! This sucks."

Gordon continued on his way, knowing that the constant noise of loading machinery and conveyer belts combined with the near constant radio chatter would drown out any minor noise he would make in the thin metal duct.

After a veritable labyrinth of twists and turns, Gordon saw some light at the end of the vent. He crawled over and prepared Martha. Poking his head around the corner and into the light, he realised he was in the empty office he had seen when he first arrived in the loading section.

Which meant this vent was… Gordon lifted his hand and saw the blood glistening on them. A shake of the head was all he could afford as he crawled out of the vent and into the small office. He could see the armoured 'Silo D' door from earlier.

A scientist stood in the corner of the room went unnoticed until he spoke.

"Well-"

Gordon cocked Martha and pointed it at the scientist, startled. The bald, moustached man put up his hands, staring at the weapon.

Martha fell.

"Sorry."

The scientist relaxed. At least, as much as someone could relax in such conditions.

Gordon noticed a box of shotgun shells before him and began loading Martha, not entirely sure what he was doing. Trial and error led to him to the correct way of inserting the cartridges.

His new companion continued on. "Well… so much for the Government. Their idea of 'containment' is to kill everyone associated with the project." He cocked his head to the side as he took in Gordon's attire. "Judging from your Hazard Suit, I'd say you were part of what went wrong. Is that right?"

A pause in the reloading ritual was Gordon's only response at first.

"Is there a way to stop this?"

"Well… if there's anyone who can put an end to this catastrophe, it's the science team in the Lambda Complex at the opposite end of the base."

A frown crossed his brow. "With the transit system out, I couldn't tell you how to get there. But there's an old decommissioned rail system somewhere through here; beyond the Silo complex."

He began pacing the room, lost in the moment of epiphany. "If you can make it through the rocket test labs, you might be able to worm your way through the old tunnels to whatever's left of the Lambda team. You can trust them."

He looked back at Gordon.

"You can trust all of us," he added quietly. Slowly, he walked over to the other side of the room, where a switch hung from the wall, 'Silo D' painted above it in red letter. The scientist pulled it down, and the huge door that could be seen through the windows opened agonisingly slowly.

A light hand fell on his shoulder. "Good luck."

Gordon faced him. "You can come with me."

The way he shook his head made Gordon uncomfortable. "I have to stay behind to close the Silo door behind you and destroy the switch. If the military manage to follow you to the Lambda complex, all of this would have been for nothing."

"I'm not going to leave you to die."

"… You have to."

After a brief moment of consideration, Gordon nodded and left the office, heading through the silo door into the expansive, dark corridor beyond. He gave another nod to the scientist, who turned and pushed the switch back up. With a great yawning noise of metal slowly grinding against metal, the silo door came down, plunging Gordon into pitch darkness.

He sighed, and pushed his glasses up his sweat covered nose.

Contact lenses would definitely have been a good idea.

(A/N: This one certainly took a while. I think you can chalk that one down to the situations Gordon comes across in this chapter being so very similar and me trying to make them at least a *little* bit different. Gordon fights the military, crawls through vents, fights the military, fights the military, and hey! Fights the military. So I had to cut little bits here and there, all the while making sure Gordon met a Barnacle for the first time. Love at first sight, or what?

A lot of inspiration for the fights came from having a sudden binge of action movies like *Die Hard* and *The Terminator* . I'm not sure if they came off well, though. Although I'm proud of Gordon's little emotional breakdown midway through.

Reptailion121: Apologies, but I won't be including Point of View, since it's not an official game, and I find it somewhat difficult to get inside the head of a Vortigaunt and really appreciate his… ahem… point of view.

On a related note, before anyone starts asking, I was going to include *Half Life: Decay* here as well (it's about two female HEV wearing scientists and takes place from before the Resonance Cascade to just before *Blue Shift* ends), but I remembered I'd never played it. And really, the story that occurs in it is secondary. Gordon's ex-girlfriend from the prologue is named after one of the characters, though (Gina, for the memory impaired)! That's something. Right?

Uh… anyway, review!

Next Chapter: Captive Freight)

Captive Freight

Disclaimer: I don't own *Half Life.*

(A/N: Many humble thanks to Hhgbh for being a bombastic beta. There aren't many adjectives meaning 'good' that begin with 'b', so I've got a hell of a job ahead of me for future chapters.)

Half Life: The Black Mesa Incident

Chapter Ten: Captive Freight

For what he was pretty sure was the millionth time, Barney wished he had his helmet with him as the blazing sun seared his face. A paranoid hand shielded his eyes, and he smiled at how ridiculous it was that he was worrying about sunburn.

Not that he tanned particularly well. He just ended up all red, blotchy, and unstoppably itchy most of the time. Apparently it was an unusual reaction at least according to Gordon. But then again, Gordon usually resembled a peeling banana after being out in the sun for more than ten minutes.

Barney made a conscious effort to stop his boots from clomping on the gravel beneath him. The noise echoed around the small canyon he stood in. The road bent around the corner in a U shape, each end with a secure access gate. The military, being the nice people that they were, had set up turrets delightfully close to the top of the ladder Barney had climbed up to reach the surface.

The only reason he really had for being alive right now was his own clumsiness. In a panic upon seeing the turrets whine to life and take aim at him, Barney had slipped on a rung and fallen down the shaft, slamming painfully to the metal floor.

Yeah. That had been fun.

Thankfully, he had managed to clamber back up and distract the turrets with a well tossed rock to allow himself to make a quick getaway around the corner.

So that was the south exit out of the question. A large yellow sign pointed him in the other direction, saying 'Train Yard' and 'Freight Warehouse'.

Trains could move fast. He wanted to move fast *away* from here. It seemed like a match made in heaven.

The secure access door at the other end attracted his attention, and Barney made his way over to the control panel beside it, even the doorframe of the mighty metal gateway dwarfing him.

He punched in his code, and it beeped helpfully before the doors tore themselves away from each other with a load groan.

Expecting more turrets, Barney took cover behind an outcropping of rock. After tossing a few baseball sized stones to test the playing field, Barney stood and cautiously made his way inside, even his lightest footsteps reverberating down the tunnel ominously.

A grey jeep with the Black Mesa logo stood a dozen or so feet ahead of him, its hazard warning flashlights clicking on and off with a regular clarity. The windows were smashed, the front doors open, and a body draped out of the driver's side and onto the floor.

Barney sighed. Looked inviting.

Cursing his boots with every step for being so freaking loud, Barney tried to creep around the car to where the body lay. It was a security guard, a bullet hole in the front of her body armour spreading cracks along its surface. A small pool of blood had gathered behind her head, so Barney decided not to move her.

Something glinted beside her, and Barney crept around her silently to the front of the vehicle where a Magnum revolver lay.

Before he knew what he was doing, Barney had picked up the weapon and whistled appreciatively at the chrome finish. He ducked his head and scrambled to take cover behind the car as the high pitched noise echoed down the tunnel and back to him.

After a few minutes, nothing happened, and Barney cautiously poked his head back out.

Still nothing.

"Mr Calhoun, you are one lucky son of a bitch…" he muttered, wiping some sweat from his forehead.

He looked down at the tightly gripped revolver in his hand, and to the standard issue handgun that nestled comfortable in his holster, caked in the slimy blood of one of those crab things. Using only his thumb and forefinger, Barney carefully extracted the sticky gun from his holster and replaced it with the revolver. A little bit cumbersome, but he could deal with it.

The Beretta was empty, anyway. He placed it where the revolver had been, and, finding now ammunition for the revolver, continued on down the tunnel, his pace slightly more confident.

Ahead of the car on the right was a small room that looked like it would barely allow him to stand up to his full height. Barney spotted a hatch inside which led to the Steam Access Tunnel.

According to the sign above it, anyway.

A brief sojourn down to the other end of the tunnel revealed a very locked blast door, so he returned to the Steam Access room.

A stubborn little shit of a padlock held the grated fence sealing the room tight until Barney hit it a few times with the butt of his revolver.

Breathing heavier than he felt he should have been, Barney sighed and went through. "What I wouldn't give for a crowbar…"

He turned the wheel that opened the hatch and climbed down the ladder, sparing one more paranoid glance around the tunnel before descending.

Much to his pure enjoyment, the accident had managed to rip apart the steam tunnels as well. Scalding hot clouds of steam burst out of pipes at random intervals while also fudging up his vision, making it delightfully easier for the headcrabs to leap out at him without warning.

By the time he banged his head on the roof of the claustrophobically tight cylinder of a tunnel for about the millionth time, he was well and truly wishing for a helmet.

He was swearing more than he thought he would in this kind of situation. Barney had always considered himself pretty clean mouthed except for a casual 'damn', 'hell' and 'crap' now and then. But now he was coming out with 'bastard', 'shit', 'fuck'… it was an odd experience.

He wondered how long it would take before he uttered the 'c' word that made Gordon blush.

A headcrab managed to insert one of its claws into his mouth before he batted it away.

Ah. *There* was the 'c' word.

Thankfully, a small elevator allowed him relief from the pain. Although the tiny platform groaned and cracked under his weight, it managed to get him the one floor it was designed to, taking him up to the warehouse basement.

Barney frowned when he saw the sign. Which warehouse? Black Mesa had more than a few. He was a little surprised at how vague it was. However, as he looked up and down the mangy, dank looking corridor, he noted that it looked like a rather old basement, probably from when the facility was being built.

One hand resting on his uselessly empty revolver, Barney journeyed forth into the shadows.

He didn't come across anything that panicked him too much, which was a pleasing sensation after a few hours of being incredibly paranoid and jumpy. Just the usual headcrabs.

Good God, he was getting used to headcrabs. He needed a social life.

An out of control power conduit in the ceiling submerged him in darkness, so he slipped out his flashlight and thumbed it on, feeling even stupider than before. Like those stupid kids in monster movies who only take a flashlight with them when it's *painfully* obvious there's something in there that can easily eat them.

Stupid kids.

A gurgling noise coming from around the corner made him slam his back to the wall. Slowly, he edged his way towards the corner. Just a few meters away from him, with its back to him, stood a two legged scaly apparition of a monster, hunched forward. It seemed to be studying how the ceiling in front of it had collapsed into the hallway, exposing the ventilation duct that used to reside in it.

Conveniently, a drum of explosive chemicals stood idly beside the creature.

Inconveniently, Barney didn't have a gun to blow it up.

He must have farted without realising or something, because the alien whipped its one eyed head around to look at him and quickly readied itself. For what, Barney wasn't sure, so he took cover.

From around the corner, he saw green electricity lance out, and he heard something not unlike some sci-fi laser pistol charging up before there was an explosion.

Slowly, cautiously, and more than a little curiously, Barney poked his head around the corner to find the scorched remains of the already wrecked corridor. The explosive drum was gone, with only a scorch mark on the floor to say it was ever there. Amazingly, there was no yellow blood anywhere in the corridor.

"That's one stupid alien."

His eyes drifted to the ventilation shaft that bent ominously down from the ceiling, beckoning him to it. He stacked up some crates and clambered in.

Even thought it was dirty, smelly and impossible to see a thing, Barney found himself enjoying it somewhat. He felt like John McClane.

After five minutes and a headcrab attack, the feeling wore off.

And Gordon did this *every time* they raced to Dr Kleiner's lab? They guy *had* to be part monkey.

Much to his relief, the ventilation shaft portion of his journey was cut short when he came to a grate in front of him. After some uncomfortable shuffling around, he managed to put his feet in front of it and kick it out of its screws and lower himself into the janitor's closet it led to.

It came out into the middle landing of two stairways, one going up on his right, the other going down on his left. Since he was tired of the constant exercise, Barney decided to go down.

There he found another dead security guard, this one riddled with bullet holes and face down on the ground without even body armour to protect him.

The military really must have caught everyone by surprise. The rest of the corridor was blocked off, so he turned around and went up the other stairway.

Radio and gasmask garbled words made him hit the dirt.

" *What were you doing here, you little shit!? Sabotage?!"*

"I don't know what you're hoping to accomplish here. I work at the teleportation labs, yes. But I didn't have anything to do with this!"

At the top of the stairway. He could barely see the top of two heads, one wearing a military helmet, the other a black balaclava. They were facing the right, where Barney guessed there was an office. One soldier was further away from him than the other. It sounded like a scientist they were talking to, his voice lower and raspier than he was used to, but definitely a scientist.

" *All of you had something to do with this. It's just a matter of when you confess."*

Barney searched the area for a weapon. He wouldn't be able to do anything with his revolver, and he didn't want to risk breaking it by hitting them with it. But he'd have to if he didn't find something to-

Ah. A pipe.

"But I didn't do anything! This is insane!"

Their response was to open fire.

Barney charged up the stairs cracked the pipe into the Balaclava soldier's kneecap, dislodging it and sending him screaming to the floor.

His companion the Helmet soldier, who had been doing most of the questioning and all of the firing, turned to face him, bringing his semi-automatic to bear. Barney swung the pipe up knocking the rifle upwards.

He dropped the pipe and grabbed the gun while Helmet soldier fired uselessly, deafening them both. Barney held it up and away from him while he pushed Helmet left and into the wall.

Over his shoulder he noticed the Balaclava picking up his rifle on the floor and taking aim.

Barney wrapped his arm around the gun arm of Helmet, pressing him into the wall with his back. Helmet continued to fire, and Barney aimed it Balaclava, the bullets slicing through his face.

A few elbows to the face loosened Helmet's grip on his gun, and Barney grabbed his arm and pivoted himself forward, tossing Helmet over his shoulder and onto the floor. The machine gun ended up in Barney's hands and pointing down at the soldier's head.

"… *mother fucker…"*

Barney fired.

"Ditto."

Not missing a beat, Barney went into the office. A balding scientist leant against a filing cabinet, desperately clutching his profusely bleeding stomach and struggling to breath.

He looked up at Barney. "I appreciate your help, but I'm afraid those bastards did their damage already."

"Try not to talk," Barney said, setting the gun aside and kneeling in front of the obviously dying scientist, trying to find something to stop the bleeding.

"If you're trying to reach the freight yards in hope of escaping, then just forget about it. The military is rounding up everyone and everything they can find, and either killing them or bringing them up here for-" he coughed, and blood came up. "-questioning."

"Listen, you've gotta save your energy." He heard the soldier's radio squawking away for them to report in. He didn't have much time.

"A colleague and I came up with our own plan for escape, and we were on our way to one of the prototype labs when we ran into them.

But-"

"Look, Doc, I've gotta get you out of here. Is there a place near here with medical supplies?"

Right, Calhoun. What are you gonna do, slap a band aid on it?

The scientist shook his head. "Listen to me. If you still want to get out of here alive, your only hope may be to find my friend. If you can get past the soldiers, find Dr Rosenberg. With him, you might… have a chance… to get out of this place…" His head slowly fell, and his shoulders drooped.

He was either unconscious or dead from the blood loss. And as much as it pained him, Barney didn't have the time to check which. More soldiers would be coming, and he had to get out of here. Scooping up his M4 and went on his way, heading through a door on the other side of the landing.

Dr Rosenberg, here I come…

Barney continued on down the corridor, the M4 submachine gun weighing down his movements comfortingly. Before long he reached the maintenance staircase going up to the top floor and went on his way, cursing the metal stairs for sounding so loud against his boots.

A radio crackled above him and he dropped to the floor, clutching his weapon for dear life.

" *A hostile in the area."*

" *Do we know who?"*

" *You think it's Freeman?"*

Barney frowned. What the hell kind of trouble was Gordon getting himself into? The frown soon broke into a smile. Gordon was alive, and maybe he'd see him again soon. Barney couldn't wait to crack open a beer with his friend and talk about this whole mess with him.

The thought spurred him on, and he silently crept up the stairs, heading towards the door closest to him. The soldiers were on the top floor. If he was careful, he could sneak past them completely. He closed the door behind him as slowly and cautiously as he could, wrapping his M4 around his shoulder as tightly as he could so it wouldn't dangle and hit something.

The door clicked shut.

" *Did you hear something?"*

" *No. Check it out."*

Barney quickly looked around the room and found a door. He went through, again closing the door behind him quietly, although with much more speed. No soldiers burst through after ten minutes, so Barney continued on his way.

A few winding corridors (and scientists who weren't Dr Rosenberg and refused to go another step without more security) later, and Barney found the door leading to the freight yard. If Rosenberg was smart, he would have hidden himself in a train and locked the door. Barney frowned. Wait, he was a scientist. Of course he was smart. Strike that, if he had *common sense* he would have hidden himself in a train and locked the door.

He pushed open the door far more brazenly than he intended. There were two train platforms, and he was stood on one of them. The other one had supply carriages on either side of it with supply crates tightly bound to them, some obviously added by the military. The doors were closed, so these carriages weren't going anywhere soon, even if they had a train to pull them.

His gaze travelled idly to his right. As it did, the soldier stood next to him idly turned to look at him.

The two stared at each other for a moment.

Barney kicked him in the crotch and ran. He leapt off the platform onto the railroad tracks as machine gun fire spattered haphazardly around him.

" *We have hostiles!"*

He turned the corner around a carriage carrying two food crates and barrelled straight into another marine, knocking him on his back. Barney rolled with it, ending up kneeling on the other side of the gas mask wearing soldier.

Barney had blown several holes in his head before he could get up.

A grenade clanked to the ground between his feet. Finding nowhere to run, he kicked it away and ran in the other direction. The explosion still managed to knock him off his feet, and he could have sworn he smelt his hair burning.

The sound of a shotgun being cocked drew his attention to the soldier in front of him. The military man cocked his head.

Oh, screw that.

Barney glanced over the soldier's shoulder and nodded, indicating for his imaginary ally to attack.

Overly jumpy, the soldier glanced over his shoulder, and Barney dived for his legs, knocking him on the ground. After some scuffling, Barney pointed the shotgun in its owner's face and fired, turning his head into a spray of red, pink and white.

One of the freight yard train doors began to groan open, slowly moving upwards. The soldier who Barney had kicked in the crotch must have called them in.

He scooped up his M4 and considered his options as he peeked under the carriage to watch their feet run towards the slowly

ascending door. There at least ten of the, fifteen at most. Two or three he could handle, but ten? He had no chance.

He stood up and cocked hid M4.

Might as well go out-

Hazel eyes finally took in the crate that was strapped to the carriage in front of him; a .50 calibre mounted machine gun.

With a grin that bordered on psychotic, Barney blasted off the locks and straps with his gun and managed to smash the wooden crate apart with the butt. By the time the door was open, Barney had clambered up on to the carriage and taken aim.

He smirked. "Who wants a piece?"

It took less than nine seconds to obliterate the soldiers. One soldier managed to squeeze off a shot that hit him in the right shoulder, but he managed to keep on firing until they were all down.

After making sure that no more soldiers were coming (at least for the moment), Barney hopped off the trailer and tended to his arm. The bullet had gone straight through, so he didn't need to take anything out. It was still bleeding a lot, though. And the hurting, but Barney was trying to be easygoing about the whole 'pain' thing right now.

He tore off some of his sleeve and made a tight bandage around his arm, hissing through his teeth when he tied the knot with his teeth. That done (and after blinking the tears away), he headed down the tunnel whence the fifteen soldiers had come. His feet slipped once or twice in the train tracks that he walked on in the tunnel, and he tried not to curse too load.

On the way, he found ammunition for his Magnum beside a fallen soldier. With relish he didn't know he had for weaponry, he loaded it up and went on his way to the light at the end of the tunnel. The door

was only half open, this one opening from left to right as opposed to the down to up door he had just come through.

Weird.

The railroad track in front of him lead outside, but there weren't any carriages on it, only a military supply van. He slowed to a crawl as he reached the opening, and poked his head around to the left.

There was another train track on his left, this one with carriages. The first just had supply crates, like in the other yard. The other had a tank on it.

That was pointing straight at him.

"Oh, shit."

With a long yell, Barney turned and ran, slamming into the wall hard when the force from the explosion hit him.

He tried to catch his breath.

That was a tank. A freaking *tank* . True, it was parked, but still.

A FREAKING TANK.

What the hell could a security guard do against *that?*

He heaved himself to his feet. A security guard *couldn't* do anything against that. So instead, he would do the secure thing.

He would run as fast as his legs would let him. If that wasn't fast enough, at least he would be able to tell the man upstairs he tried.

Reluctantly, he tossed away his M4. No way he would run properly with that thing flying around all over the place. A few cricks of his neck and a few curses later, Barney tore out into the yard, eyes darting around instantly for an exit. He ran straight towards the tank as it attempted to get a bead on him.

He dove beneath the carriage the tank rested on. Barney quickly looked around. There, behind the tank and hidden from his view from the entrance he had used before, was a small stairway leading to a door. He checked that the tank's cannon was facing the other way before rolling out and running to the door, slamming it shut behind him with such force he was worried it would fall off its' hinges.

He needn't have worried. The explosive shell from the tank did that for him, as well as propelling him down the small corridor and into a wall.

He hissed through his teeth as he got his feet, clutching his back. After a few attempts, he managed to stand up straight, although he would be seeing spots for a week.

Barney limped onwards until he entered another rail tunnel. It was sealed to the right, so he went left, the act of keeping his feet from slipping between the wooden rungs of the tracks oddly fascinating.

Sunlight blared through a hole in the train door at the end of the tunnel. Barney didn't even want to think about what kind of alien thing could blow a hole in a metal door. His leg aching, he leapt up and managed to scuttle through the hole, landing surprisingly gracefully in the outdoors.

He was in another train yard, this one with a turntable in the middle. A train door on his right was open, a freight train parked inside. Barney walked over to it quietly, pulling out the Magnum and clicking back the hammer.

A banging suddenly came from the train, and Barney fell and rolled to the wall.

"Hello! Can anyone hear me?"

Barney's head perked up. That didn't sound like some heartless killing machine.

"Is anyone there? Preferably not the military!"

He smiled. Definitely not a heartless killing machine. He got to his feet.

"Dr Rosenberg?"

A pause. "Yes. Who is that?"

"Barney Calhoun, Doc. I'm a security guard."

His sigh was muffled by the train. "Thank God for that."

"I'll have you out in a sec. Just gotta sort out the turntable here."

"Yes, I set it myself so that military would think my train wasn't occupied."

"Good idea. The banging and the yelling? Not so much."

He could have sworn he heard a small laugh, but he decided not to hang around. With a spring in his step, he lightly jogged over to the turntable control booth and rotated it so it was facing the correct way. After a few more button presses, the train was on its way out of the garage and into a waiting train platform on the other side.

Feeling like a kid on Christmas morning, Barney ran up onto the platform and waited impatiently as the train pulled up to a stop at the platform.

With a grunt, he pulled down the large bolt holding the door shut and slid it aside. He stepped in and gave Rosenberg a wave as he entered, a greeting on his lips.

Then the doors shut behind him, the bolt loudly sliding into place on the other side.

" *All right, we got that bastard."*

" *What's the status on Freeman?"*

They walked away as they continued speaking, and Barney lost the rest of the conversation. He turned his attention to the sitting form of Dr Rosenberg at the other end of the trailer. With a sigh of resignation, Barney's shoulders drooped and he made his way over to him, sitting down next to him.

"So. You're the Doc I've been looking for."

He sighed, as though tired of the question. "Yes, I'm Doctor Rosenberg. Although I'm not too proud to admit it, seeing as I'm partially responsible for all of this," he said irritably, throwing a piece of torn nametag against the wall. He didn't seem too ready to elaborate, so Barney didn't push it.

Rosenberg turned towards him, his thin rimmed glasses barely reflecting in the dull light.

"How did you know my name?"

Barney opened his mouth, but then closed it, suddenly unable to look at the Doctor. For the first time since the whole mess started, Barney started to think about all the dead bodies he had seen and caused today.

And he thought he had kept on moving out of duty. Ha. It was distract him from all the bodies lying around him.

Rosenberg got the picture. "Oh… I see."

His head dropped, and he buried it in his hands, covering his ears. His fingers barely managed to get his short cut hair between them.

"Poor Harold."

Barney looked around the train for any escape route. There was a grate in the ceiling, but it was too high for him to jump. Maybe if Rosenberg gave him a boost…

He shook his head. What was he thinking? A scientist? Helping with something *physical?*

"So… Doc. You had a plan to get us out of this mess?"

There was a pause for a moment. "Yes…" he cleared his throat quickly. "Yes, our plan was to get to one of the old prototype labs. It involves something very few people within the facility are authorised to know about." He smiled wryly. "The same technology that brought about this catastrophe could very well be our only way out."

"Okay…"

With a sudden (but small) burst of energy, Rosenberg shifted so he could face Barney more fully.

"You see, I was involved in the very early work on teleporter technology, long before the Lambda complex was even built. There *may* be enough equipment in the old lab to allow us to… piece together a device that would allow us to teleport outside the facility."

'Piece' together? Barney didn't like how haphazard that sounded.

Rosenberg smiled. "As improbable as that might sound to someone like yourself," he said, a slight chuckle in his voice. Barney went along with the laugh, even though his head said to kick the condescending smartass in the crotch.

The scientist heaved himself to his feet, dusting himself off. "Of course, none of that does us a whole lot of good while we're stuck in here." He looked around the train, and his eyes settled on the grate above them. The way he adjusted his glasses seemed oddly familiar to Barney.

"Hmm… maybe I'll be able to give you a boost through that vent in the ceiling."

Barney got to his feet. "A… boost?"

"Yes. If you're lucky, maybe you'll be able to catch those soldiers by surprise."

"… right. So… a boost."

"Yes. Is there a problem?"

"Uh, no. I just… didn't expect you to…"

Rosenberg blinked cluelessly.

"… never mind."

With far too much energy in his smile, Rosenberg squatted and cupped his hands together in front of him. "Let's try this."

Feeling slightly wary, Barney stepped up onto the waiting hands and hopped up, reaching up for the grate and pushing it open far louder than he wanted to.

No response from the soldiers outside. They must not have noticed.

Or they were just playing possum so they could blow his head off. He shrugged and grasped the sides of the opening, pulling himself up. With a grunt, Rosenberg fell to the ground in the trailer, looking exhausted from the effort.

Barney smiled. At least his heart was in the right place. With relish, he pulled out his Magnum and thumbed back the hammer.

There was a soldier directly below him, his helmet placed on a nearby crate while he enjoyed the shade from the hot New Mexico sun. Barney leapt down on top of him, smashing the butt of the Magnum into the back of his skull. He fell like a ton of bricks and with about as much subtlety.

" *Shit! He's out! Move!"*

Barney looked around a few times before leaping behind some large metal crates. Two soldiers were around the corner instantly. Barney hoped that was all there were in the immediate area.

He peeked through a gap between two crates. Their backs were to him as they checked out their fallen comrade. It would only be a few seconds before they started searching for him, and probably executing Rosenberg as punishment, too.

He slammed into the pile of crates in front of him as hard as he could, and they toppled, completely crushing one soldier while the other barely managed to roll away in time. Barney pulled out his revolver and ran from his hiding position, firing blindly at the soldier.

Puffs of powder popped off the soldier as the bullets hit his bullet proof armour, and he took aim with his semi automatic. Barney ran and dove behind some wooden crates, knowing they wouldn't be able to stop machine gun bullets.

But instead of the roaring hail of gunfire, all he heard was a dull thud and a quick groan. Carefully, he looked around the corner to see the soldier on the ground, Rosenberg lying on top of him in a very uncomfortable looking position.

"I managed to climb out myself. I was going to jump him, but I fell."

Barney just smiled as he walked over and helped him up. "Fine by me, Doc. But, uh…" he nodded to the train. "You made *that* jump all by yourself? The grate was up twice as high as you."

"Yes, but there was a nearby sheet of construction wood, and I managed to carefully balance myself on it and-"

"Okay, okay," he said, scooping up the fallen soldier's M4. "You might want to look away, Doc," he said, point the gun down at the soldier's head.

"Why, I- oh. Yes, of course." Rosenberg turned away, and Barney pulled the trigger. He was sure he saw Rosenberg cringe.

"So… Doc," Barney began cautiously, leading Rosenberg away from the dead body. "Where to next? You're the tour guide on this little journey of ours."

"Yes… all right. All right. We'll need to head back to the area where you… met Harold. The access to the old lab should still be there but we may need to break through some of the newer construction to get to it."

"Okay. But we can't go back the way I came because… there's a tank that way, and I don't think you're in good enough shape to dodge that."

"Indeed. No, there should be a door leading through the office area of the building that can take us to the stairway. That should take us to the basement where the old lab is based."

"Oh. Okay, then. Let's get the heck out of dodge."

It didn't take them long before Barney realised they were going to go down the stairway where he had barely avoided the soldiers earlier. Except this time he was going to come out on the top floor.

Right where the soldiers were.

He sighed and put a hand on Rosenberg's shoulder before he opened the door and introduced himself to hot, lead-y death.

"You might want to let me do this," he whispered.

Rosenberg, obviously not understanding but deferring to his experience anyway (it was a nice feeling, respect from a scientist that wasn't Gordon), backed away from the door and hid beside it.

After silently psyching himself up, Barney kicked the door down and fired, blasting a few holes in the clueless soldier who was stood

there. Another soldier, this one stood on the stairs below Barney, brought his weapon up to bear. Barney did the same, and they both froze.

"Calhoun? Is it safe now?"

Rosenberg popped his head around, and the soldier opened fire on him. With a yelp, the scientist fell back inside, giving Barney his opening. Within a few seconds, the soldier below them was dead.

Barney turned to the open doorway.

"Doc, you can-"

The previously felled (and thought dead) soldier behind him sliced out with his machete, catching Barney in the leg. With a yell of pain, Barney dropped his gun and fell to one knee, turning to face his enemy.

The knife darted towards him as the soldier aimed for his belly. Barney dodged to the side and drove his palm upwards into the soldier's nose, smashing it flat and pasting blood on his hand. With another punch, the soldier was out.

Trying his best not to wince, Barney got to his feet. "Doc. You can come out now."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure. Can we please go?"

"Of-" Rosenberg popped his head out and looked around. "-of course."

They continued on their way.

"You could have let me help, you know."

"Sorry Doc, but I need you alive to take me to the lab. And, y'know, it *is* kinda my job."

"Do you really think anyone would begrudge you for abandoning your job now?"

Barney thought about it for a moment. "… I would."

They walked in silence down the stairs, Barney barely managing to keep in the gasps of pain as he stood on the cut leg.

"You look like a mess, Calhoun."

"Thanks, Doc. You're pretty, too."

"No, I mean… you have a gunshot wound in the arm, bruises and cuts seemingly everywhere, a knife wound to the left thigh and… it looks like the back of your body armour has *melted* ."

"It has?" Barney idly looked over, trying to see his back. "Neat."

"I don't think it's anything to joke about, Calhoun."

"You got a point, Doc?"

"You need medical attention."

"Do we look like we have the time for me to see a medic?"

"At least let me take a look at your leg. It could become infected if we don't do something. It's bleeding profusely."

"Uh… yeah. Let's get to the lab, first, huh?"

"… very well."

Rosenberg didn't sound happy with the compromise. Neither was Barney, really, but he was stuck for time. He wanted to get the hell

out of here before any more soldiers or aliens arrived. God knows he'd seen enough of them today.

Fifteen minutes later, they were facing a wall seemingly blocked off by a wooden construction wall.

"We'll have to break through here to get to the elevator," Rosenberg said simply.

"Okey dokey."

Barney hit it a few times with the butt of the M4, cracking its surface. He cursed under his breath, not wanting to offend the Doc any more than he needed to. With his arm all shot to hell, he couldn't get enough leverage. He'd just have to blast it apart.

Rosenberg gently took the gun from him. "Perhaps you should let me do that while you rest."

"Uh…"

The reply had barely left his lips before Rosenberg had smashed the wooden partition to splinters and wandered inside. He ignored the sign erected in front of the open elevator there.

"Hey, Doc," Barney said, following him into the sparsely lit elevator, "is this safe? I mean… you said we were piecing this together or something like that, right?"

The scientist shifted uncomfortably as he pushed the button to take them down. "We should have chosen the Lambda reactor for an escape… but the crew there is bent on fighting the creatures, with all their hopes set on someone named Freeman."

"Freeman?"

"Yes. God knows why. He was the one who started this whole mess." He shrugged. "Let those fools try to fight a battle they can't win. I just want to get out of here."

"Right…"

They descended in silence. There were no doors to the elevator, so Barney stood as far back as he could as he saw the walls move in front of him. They eventually slowed to a halt outside a dark, dank corridor that looked like it hadn't been used by anyone in decades, let alone years.

"Doc… how long has this lab been here?"

Rosenberg looked uncomfortable, but said nothing. "I hope the old security system is still active. With any luck my old fingerprint ID is still valid and on file," he said, pointing to two doors on their right, both bent horribly out of shape, as though crushed.

They went through into what Barney assumed had been the reception area of the lab. On his left was a very secure looking door with a fingerprint reader next to it. Looking somewhat concerned, Rosenberg put his hand on it. After a few breathless seconds, it bleeped affirmatively, and they quickly went through before it changed its mind.

So far, Barney wasn't too impressed with the look of the lab. Anomalous Materials looked swankier and smarter.

A white haired scientist with hair so thin around his temples Barney wondered why he bothered growing it was hunched over a device at the side of the room. He glanced over at the two newcomers, smiling as he recognised his colleague. He barely registered Barney.

"Dr Rosenberg, thank God you made it. We've managed to piece together some of the larger equipment, but you'll need to oversee the rest of the construction."

Rosenberg smiled like an old pro as he put his hand on the scientist's shoulder. Barney presumed he was used to being a leader in these kinds of situations. Well, as close to an 'alien invasion with the military thrown in for flavour' situation as one could get.

"Excellent Walter. Finish aligning the power cell matrix and I'll see if I can get the system online in the main room. Now," he said, looking at Barney and nodding down a corridor, "there's no time to waste." After another fingerprint reader, they were through into the lab. It didn't look too bad. It was no Anomalous Materials test chamber, but it looked complicated enough for Barney to put his faith in it's scientific aspects.

Beside him, Rosenberg looked up at the emitter, his hands on his hips as he nodded. "Well, looks like the equipment is in better shape than I expected." Lost in his work, he left Barney to stand around idly while he darted around the chamber, pressing buttons and adjusting settings on seemingly every control panel he passed.

"Unfortunately, this older technology does not have the ability to target an Earth destination in its' current state. You see Mr Calhoun," he said, looking over at him as he moved to another panel, "teleportation is not as easy as going from point A to point B. We discovered a strange border world that was somehow involved in the process which kept us from predicting where any given teleportation event may lead to back on Earth."

The machinery above his head was beginning to whirr and thrum. Barney stared up at it.

"Is that border world thing where all these aliens are coming from?"

"That's right. As I was saying, some of the more promising research on the matter led to a device that could be attached to the strange crystalline structures we found on this border world," he said, moving over to a control panel behind Barney, pushing two very plain looking green buttons.

"Crystalline? Like those yellow things they experimented on at Anomalous Materials?"

"Exactly. Now," he said, turning around and nodding up at the equipment " *this* device would then be used as a focal point and a

relay that would assist in the teleportation." He shifted uncomfortably. "Well, in *theory*, that is," he mumbled.

Before Barney could even mutter a sarcastic reply Rosenberg was off to the other side of the room, fiddling with something over there. Barney made his way over, keeping his eyes on the ever louder machinery in the center of the room.

"We lost contact with the survey group shortly after the device was in place. We later found other methods of aiming the field, but all of the equipment in this lab uses the older technology."

"So… that means what?" Barney said, catching up to Rosenberg. He noticed a booth tucked away behind the teleporter that he didn't see when he first entered. Yet more complicated equipment and control panels lay inside.

The scientist took a large breath before turning to face him. "In order for any of us to get out of here alive… someone is going to have to go to the border world and activate the device."

Barney stared at him for a moment. "I'm not gonna like this, am I?"

"I'm sorry, Mr Calhoun, but… I'm afraid you're the only one who can do this, seeing as everyone else will be needed to operate the equipment," he managed ashamedly, moving behind the booth and starting some work there. His voice went up a bit as he moved on from the subject of sending Barney to certain death.

"We should be able to get you fairly close to where the survey team had set up, but I fear the likelihood of running into alien creatures *is* very high. Once you find the equipment, simply power it on and align the emitters until the signal reaches maximum strength." He looked up at Barney through the glass, resting forward on the panel. "We'll re-open the teleporter for your return, but you *must* hurry back, as we can only keep it open for a short amount of time."

"Right. Gotcha. Power on, align, maximum, hurry back." He paused. "Am I gonna be able to breath over there?"

Whether Rosenberg ignored or missed his comment, Barney didn't know. "All right, I'm going to initiate the teleporter charging sequence now. Be ready, Mr Calhoun; once the field is open it will become unstable very quickly." He tilted his head to look at something above and behind Barney. "Simmons, can you hear me? Get ready!"

Barney looked up and around and saw a small room on the floor above them, overlooking the chamber. From a distance, the guy kind of looked like Dr Vance, if a bit weightier in the midsection.

Barney wondered if Vance and his family were okay. And Dr Kleiner. What could that old guy do against hordes of aliens and marines?

"We're almost there."

He brought his attention back the loud machinery hanging above his head. It was point down at a slightly raised platform in the middle of the room.

"I'm serious, Doc. Do I need a space helmet or something?"

"The primary capacitors have reached full charge…"

"What about dialects? Is there some universal greeting I can use?"

"Simmons, release the damping locks and open the fields!"

Energy snaked out of lights that stood at the four corners of the square platform and the teleporter itself, all of them converging in the middle. The room shook.

"Do you at least have a handbook?!"

The rumbling stopped. An orb of pure green floated silently in front of Barney. He stared at it.

"The field! It's open! Calhoun, enter the teleporter!"

"What about all these cuts and stuff? Do I need-"

Rosenberg tossed him a first aid kit and pointed to the field. "Go! Now!"

He glanced back and forth between Rosenberg's fevered expressions and the orb.

"I better be getting overtime for this." He took a deep breath and ran forward. "OhSHIIII-"

Barney dove headfirst into the orb, and everything went green around him.

(A/N: Hope I didn't leave my readers waiting for too long! Review!

Next Chapter: *Blast Pit*)

Blast Pit

Disclaimer: I don't own *Half-Life.*

(A/N: Thanks to Hhgbh for beta work. You're a rock!)

The Black Mesa Incident

Chapter Eleven: Blast Pit

His name had been Terry. The big guy in the gym who always gave him *that* look. The look that Barney always told him to ignore, because it wasn't important. And Gordon tended to agree with him; why should it matter what some overgrown body builder thought of his workout routine? Just because he didn't care for weight training. In many ways, aerobic exercise was healthier than anaerobic, he would say to Terry.

As he let out a grunt and tugged on the plank of wood fruitlessly for the eleventh time, Gordon was beginning to doubt the wisdom of his own words. After making his way down the pitch black tunnel, Gordon had come to another slightly-but-not-by-much better lit tunnel going to the left. Unfortunately for him, it was blocked off by some 'Danger' placard barriers and, as Barney would put it, 'a shit load' of planks.

Of said shit load, Gordon had managed to remove five, which still wasn't enough room for him to squeeze through. He once more pushed his glasses up his sweaty nose before they had the chance to slip down again. Another pull, and the sixth plank sprung off the wall Gordon's end, sending him onto his rear. *That* had happened every time he had removed a plank, and it was getting somewhat… irritating.

With a growl so restrained it was almost inaudible, Gordon pulled himself to his feet and surveyed the damage. He smiled. Finally, a

gap he could squeeze himself through, even with his Hazard Suit on. At this point, abandoning the suit certainly wasn't an option, especially if he was heading into a missile silo complex.

He took a peek through the gap before doing anything else. Inside was what Gordon guessed was a cargo room for the elevator leading down to the silo. The green glow of spilt radioactive material cast a sickly bright hue across the room, illuminating it in a way Gordon didn't enjoy.

An upwards tilt of his head revealed the cargo elevator chamber in the distance. No gurgling, growling or snarling. A good sign.

Gordon tossed Martha through first, then his crowbar. He wasn't sure how much longer he would be able to hold on to the both of them. He wouldn't be able to rely on continually finding ammunition for Martha, and he certainly couldn't afford to keep on lugging her around.

He frowned.

It, Gordon, *it.* Martha is a shotgun.

One of the crates was marked 'Office Supplies'. On a whim, Gordon smashed it open with his crowbar, impatient with all the wedging and pulling. It worked surprisingly well.

After some fishing, he found some duct tape and plastered the crowbar to the top of Martha, making sure not to let it interfere with the workings of the reloading mechanism. That done, he threaded his arm through the strap and tossed the shotgun over his shoulder, happy to have both hands free for once.

He climbed down the ladder and made his way to the elevator control room, the glass viewport of which had been smashed for some time. He activated the cargo elevator, and the appropriate warning noise sounded.

Along with a dull thudding noise behind him. Gordon turned to face the door to a supply closet. Upon which dents were appearing. Rather than greet whatever was behind it, Gordon sided with the better part of valour and quickly slid his way down the ladder and onto the now arriving cargo elevator.

A zombie, confused at the sudden absence of its visitor, looked down at him from the elevator control room. If it could have flipped him the bird, Gordon was sure it would have done at that moment.

He pressed the red button in front of him, and, after a brief worrying pause, the elevator started to descend. A cautious hand cocked Martha, and Gordon prepared himself for whatever kind of creature could have knocked over the radioactive material that was making the entire elevator shaft glow neon green.

As it reached the ground floor, he noticed that the green glow wasn't coming from spilt radioactive material, at least not in his immediate vicinity. He gave himself a mental slap and shook his head when he realised that the suit's Geiger counter hadn't registered anything radioactive.

Although under the circumstances, Gordon thought he could be forgiven for forgetting the little details in a moment of pure fear and adrenaline. He stepped off the cargo elevator and surveyed the new area. He was in a rail tram loading area. The emergency lights were working surprisingly well for an abandoned part of the facility.

And lo and behold, there was a tram ready and waiting for him. A platform ran alongside the rails, and Gordon considered taking the long way, considering his luck everything electrical or mechanical since even before this whole thing started.

Funnily enough, he wasn't much of a nature person either. It seemed he didn't really fit in or belong anywhere.

He noticed where the green glow was coming from; around the corner of the tunnel, out of sight. And it *would* have been out of mind

too, if the tunnel wasn't his only way forward. With a sigh that was becoming all too familiar, Gordon slung Martha over his shoulder, pushed up his glasses and hopped down from the platform and onto the tram.

The controls were fairly simple, and were (luckily) the same that he was used to from hazard course training. A handle that always reminded Gordon of the gear sticks in automatic cars could be pushed forward or back, and had six different settings; backwards, stop, forwards, super forwards, super duper forwards and kiss your ass goodbye forwards.

Barney had named them.

He grasped the throttle a few times to get a steady grip before cautiously pushing it forward. With a mechanical grunt of displeasure, the tram burst into motion, making Gordon stumble slightly. He nodded in approval. He was well on his way.

The tram continued on at its' slow trundling pace.

Gordon checked his watch, groaned and rolled his eyes when he realised he wasn't wearing one. Bored green eyes looked back down to the throttle.

With a shrug, he pushed it up to maximum.

And almost fell off the tram as it sprang into life and raced forward. He tumbled back and fell on his rear. Feeling somewhat annoyed and with a grunt that proved it, Gordon heaved himself up from the awkward position, wrapping his hand around one of the guardrails that lay on either side of the tram to help.

He stood up, leaning over the controls. He squinted when he saw a bright green haze over everything. A quick adjustment of his glasses proved that it wasn't a trick of the eyes.

Then he looked up.

Before him was a veritable lake of toxic waste. Where it had come from, Gordon didn't know. All his keen scientific mind could tell him was that the track ended just at the tip of the lake, with a *very* thin bumper being all that stood between him and a rather nasty dose of radiation poisoning.

And he was going at speeds that would pretty much annihilate that pithy excuse for a bumper.

With only a few seconds to think on the matter, Gordon tried to judge just how big the lake was, and what kind of jump would be required to cross it without incident. There was some solid ground at the far end of the room, with what looked like a ladder leading up to a large pipe safely placed there.

He sighed, shrugged, and pumped up the speed to maximum. The tram slammed into the bumper, which barely existed as far as Gordon was concerned. It did, however, send the tram up into the air at an angle, arching over the toxic waste lake like a rainbow.

Gordon frowned. A rainbow? Where had that come from?

It worried him that he was thinking about the random words his brain came up with at inconvenient times, rather than thinking about the fact that he was flying over a lake of toxic waste in a tram designed for the transport of heavy goods.

The arch the tram was taking began its' downward spiral, and Gordon clambered up on top of the control panel and kicked off, aiming for the 'island' of solid ground at the far end of the room.

And then he noticed the alien waiting for him to land, opening its' tentacle lips, looking very ready for a mid-morning snack. Gordon adjusted his flight pattern so that he would land on top of the beast and not *in* it.

In a manner so graceful Barney would have given him sarcastic applause, Gordon slammed into the two legged creatures' back and

tumbled head over heels off it, rolling along the ground until he hit the wall with a dull (but still painful) thud.

And the alien thing didn't even have the common decency to allow him to shake off his dizziness.

Rather than waste any more bullets on slow, stupid alien things, Gordon made a run for the ladder leading into the titanic pipes overhead. Luck must have been on his side, because he made it to and up the ladder with a few seconds to spare.

Halfway up the ladder, Gordon thought about that statement, although he didn't stop climbing. Luck? On his side? If Gordon had been the type, he would have laughed. Being the kind of person he was, though, all he managed was a wry smile as he reached the top of the grey, rusting ladder.

He wasn't quite sure what the pipe was for, but all he knew was that it was big enough to accommodate him *standing up*, which at this point in his life was a luxury as far as pipes were concerned.

Although unsure as to whether it could support his weight, Gordon threw himself through the opening in the pipe, landing with an *incredibly* loud clang. After he pulled the fingers from his ears, he noticed the small ladder that allowed maintenance crews to climb inside the pipes.

With grumbling that bordered dangerously on curse words, Gordon stalked onwards down the pipe, following it to (hopefully) the rocket test labs.

A relatively quick walk around the corner, and Gordon came to another ladder leading to another opening in the top of the pipe. The way forward was blocked, so with a mental shrug Gordon climbed up.

Directly below him was another lake of toxic waste. Although technically it was probably more of a pond. But in front of him lay an

observation platform that led into a corridor. And Gordon liked corridors. Corridors were simple, boring, safe. Nice.

After a long, deep breath, Gordon leapt forward and landed feet first on the platform. His forward momentum forced him to go into a roll, which was incredibly difficult with a shotgun slung over his shoulder. As it was, Martha interfered with the whole process, leaving Gordon to tumble awkwardly to the floor into something halfway between a foetal position and that picture of the walking man on traffic light signs.

Gordon wondered if anyone would mind if he went to sleep for a few minutes. Just a few minutes, and he'd be just fine. His head lolled back and hit the concrete floor. He hissed from the small pain he had been dealt, and allowed himself another small smile at the fact that he was choosing to complain about conking his head on the floor, rather than complaining about… well, everything else that had happened to him today.

He was getting more like Barney every day.

God, that idea was scary.

So scary, in fact, it made Gordon heave himself to his feet continue onwards. Just in case of any further impromptu forward rolls, Gordon removed Martha from her perch over his shoulder, letting her weight in his hands comfort him.

He turned the corner, and was once again bathed in the lovely luminescent green of toxic waste, the Geiger counter in his suit crackling angrily in protest. Gordon hadn't noticed the counter when he had been flying over the toxic waste in the tram.

Realising he had just answered his own query, Gordon cricked his neck, adjusted his glasses, and moved forward. His feet echoed loudly as they stepped onto a metal platform. He was standing in a huge cylindrical chamber, the toxic waste in a pool far down below

him. The platform on which he stood ran about a quarter of the circumference of the chamber.

Directly in the middle of the chamber stood another cylinder, this one going from the very top to the bottom. With a tiny nod, Gordon realised that the cylinder in the middle contained the rocket test labs. His ticket out of here, or so it seemed.

He walked slowly across the platform, heading for the other end of the bending walkway. There was a little cubby-hole of a room there, built into the chamber. From there, a straight walkway led into the rocket test labs.

A familiar whirr made itself known to his eardrums, and the strange one eyed three legged things from before reintroduced themselves to him, en masse.

There were seven of them, and while Martha took care of six of them, Gordon ran out of ammunition when it came to the last little monster. The creature started up, ready to release the shockwave that Gordon knew the platform wouldn't be able to take. He grasped the other end of Martha, and, after a quick shrug, used it as a golf club to send the little alien thing away and down into the toxic waste below.

Gordon tried to avoid the temptation to lean on Martha like a golf club. Instead, he slung the spent shotgun over his shoulder. If he didn't find any more ammunition soon, he'd have to throw her away. The bespectacled scientist wasn't sure whether he hated that idea or liked it. His relationship with the admittedly cumbersome weapon had become somewhat love/hate. On the one hand, he loved that it kept him alive. On the other, he hated that it stopped him from running away from trouble, which was by far the preferred option, at least from his end. He sighed, shook his head, and continued on.

After that, he reached the end of the quarter circular platform without incident. He stopped himself before he stepped onto the straight walkway. Toxic waste lay what he interpreted as miles below him.

Why the hell didn't these things have guardrails? Pipes running alongside the walkway wasn't really enough to guarantee the safety of the Black Mesa personnel. Gordon told himself to stop whining like Barney, and walked over the walkway as fast as he could manage without running.

He stepped through a solid metal doorway in the side of the cylinder. He was in the airlock. Looking around, Gordon saw the big red lever that could only be turned to six o'clock or three. At the moment it was at six. There was a closed metal door in front of him, the frame around it the same as the one he had just come through, yellow and black stripes indicating the danger of the pressurised entrance.

Above the lever was a green sign that read 'SILO D-01 ACCESS'.

That sounded like a rocket test lab to him. Gordon wrapped his hand around the lever, and with a good yank, pulled it up to the three o'clock position.

The door in front of him slid open as the one behind him closed. Gordon looked behind him for a moment to check that the door behind had indeed shut, and then turned back.

And came face to face with a zombie.

It swung its' lengthy hands out with an annoyed growl, and Gordon tumbled back underneath its' swiping attack. He reached for Martha, but quickly remembered the problem with said weapon. Acting on instinct, Gordon swung Martha at the zombie's head. The way it reacted, it was though nothing had happened. Wiry fingers latched around the shotgun and pried it from Gordon's grasp, tossing it away and into the corridor behind it.

A deafening clanging sound echoed into the airlock, but it certainly wasn't the zombie that was making it.

Gordon saw the zombie's feet. One was in the airlock, the other in the corridor. He reached over and pulled the access lever back

down. The metal door sliced the alien/human in half with little difficulty.

Rather than think about what he now had on his hazard suit and his face, Gordon scrambled to his feet and reached for the lever. He paused as he realised he couldn't hear the clanging. Maybe it *had* been the zombie. After a few more seconds of intent listening, Gordon heaved the lever back up, and the airlock hatch opened.

The clanging noise erupted back into being. Gordon stepped into the corridor that curved around the silo, scooping up Martha and slinging her over his shoulder once again. As he continued on, he realised that the noise was coming from *inside* the silo. But what could it be? Nothing that Gordon had seen so far was big enough to make that kind of noise. Maybe there was just a lot of them.

Wandering hazel eyes came across the form of a man with slicked black hair, wearing the customary white coat and blue shirt associated with Black Mesa scientific personnel. He seemed to be conscious, but just barely.

Gordon knelt down beside him, wracking his brains for First Aid knowledge. Blood caked the scientist's hands as he clutched them against his abdomen. He looked as though he dare not remove his hands for the irrational fear that everything might fall out.

"Are you all right?" he asked, although he wasn't sure if the man could hear him over the incessant noise. He lay a hand on the scientist's shoulder.

His head whipped up from the contact, his reddening eyes boring into Gordon's as he grasped onto him, clutching his arms.

"Fire the rocket engine. Destroy the damn things before they grow any larger!"

His face crumpled, and he let out a brief cry of agony before his eyes rolled up into his head, and he collapsed forward, his head resting on

Gordon's shoulder.

Gently, Gordon lay him back against the silo wall where he was sat.

Larger? There were things in there that were getting *larger* ?

Gordon loved the sound of that. He continued on, ascending up some steps that led to another sealed door on his right. Another red lever lay beside this door.

'PROP/LAB 01 ROCKET TEST'.

Sounded promising. As Gordon reached for the lever, the clanging stopped. A second of silence. And then Gordon heard the noise. It was halfway between a cow's moo and a bloodcurdling howl. Haunting, like a ghost that could barely be seen but was still there, all the same.

Feeling ever more confident in his mission, Gordon turned the lever, and the door opened.

Inside was a lab with an observation window looking into the rocket test chamber. A large red button lay in the center of the control panel, two lights on the right of it and one on the left, all of them shining approvingly. On the left side of the room stood a wall of control panels, the purpose of which Gordon could only vaguely understand.

A balding scientist huffed and puffed as he desperately worked at the control panel in front of the window, checking every few seconds to make sure that whatever-it-was wasn't looking at him. Gordon stepped inside as the scientist moved to the red button and reached to press it.

The glass of the observation window exploded into the room, knocking the screaming scientist on his back and making Gordon duck down and shield his face. When he lowered his arm, he froze at the sight before him.

The creature was a green tentacle, its skin scaly and armour-like. At the end stood a large black claw, almost like a beak, a solitary red eye perched above it. With one stab, it impaled the scientist through the stomach, pulling out through the window with it. He was still screaming when he was torn in half.

Not knowing where his courage was coming from, Gordon scrambled along the floor on his belly, heading for the control panel below the window.

The red button had text reading 'TEST FIRE' above it. Gordon peered over the top of the control panel. There were three of those creatures inside the chamber. Above their heads were the rocket engines. Gordon's gaze fell back on the red button. He slammed his hand down on it. A negative sounding noise, like one off a game show, was all the response he got. Frowning, he tried again. The same noise, except this time it felt more personal.

Gordon looked across the control panel and found that the lights that had shone so brightly before had gone out. Above the two on the right, there was text reading 'FUEL' and 'OXY', and on the left, 'POWER'.

Except Gordon had no idea how to get any of those working again. He muttered a silent curse, which the creatures appeared to hear, since they began their clanging once again. Gordon felt like flipping them the bird. To his right was an open metal door. Sparing only a few quick glances to the observation window above his head, Gordon got to his feet and sprinted through the doorway, slamming into the wall of the corridor which quickly turned right.

A ladder ahead of him led up to a ledge. The shadowy figure of a security guard managed to scare the shit out of Gordon long enough for him to lose his grip on the ladder and slip. A helpful hand latched on to his and pulled him up. With a final great heave, they fell onto the ground next to each other. They both picked themselves up, and the security guard dusted himself off. Gordon almost did the same,

but then realised that his hazard suit was pretty screwed by now in the 'keeping clean' department.

He smiled at the guard. "Thank you-"

His new companion put his finger to his lips. "Hey; be quiet. This thing *hears us."*

The clanging made it almost impossible for Gordon to hear what he was saying. After a few seconds of processing, he cocked an eyebrow. "It-"

"Hey!"

Gordon looked through the doorway behind him, where two open crates of grenades lay, the rather pointless 'DANGER: EXPLOSIVES' written across the side in red paint. He walked through and saw the entrance to the rocket test chamber, where a lone security guard was firing off pot-shots from his handgun at the three tentacle monsters.

"Right here, you bastards!"

The security guard rushed out past Gordon, pushing him aside.

"Robertson! Get back in here, now!"

Robertson didn't hear him; he just continued firing over and over again, screaming as he went. Just as his companion was getting ready to intervene, a large black claw descended and went straight through his neck and out between his legs, silencing him.

Gordon didn't know how he knew what the surviving security guard was going to do. He had just seen so much of people surviving under pressure…

The security guard slipped his handgun out of his holster and charged forward. Or at least, tried to. Gordon latched on to him from

behind, threading his arms up through the guard's armpits and round his shoulders.

"Get off me! Ted! Get off me!"

He was screaming now, hysterical. Gordon managed to pull him back through the doorway and back onto the little ledge area. He waited until the guard stopped struggling before he released him. The man sobbed uncontrollably as he collapsed to the ground, his back against the wall.

"I've got to… I…"

Gordon didn't know what he could say, so he settled for gently prising the handgun from the guards' hand, not wanting any impromptu suicide attempts while he thought about what to do. He removed Martha and slung her on the floor before sitting down beside the guard, his back to the wall as well.

' *This thing hears us.'* That's what the muttering man beside him had said. Hyper-sensitive hearing? Did that mean the eyesight wasn't as strong? He looked through the doorway and saw the open crates, a few grenades on the floor beside them here and there.

He cleared his throat in a way he hoped seemed sympathetic. He understood how the man felt. God knew he had seen enough today to make him weep. It didn't seem to grab the security guards' attention over the din the monsters were making.

"Do you…"

That got his attention, however distant it was. The security guard's head lolled over to look at him.

"Do you know how to turn the rocket engines back on for a test?"

The security guard wiped his nose with the back of his hand, irritably stubbing out any tears with clenched fists.

"God…" he whispered. His head fell back against the wall, his helmet making a slight thud as it hit. He took some breaths.

"Come on Philips. Come on." Feeling himself suitably stable, he looked over to Gordon. "What did you say?"

"I was asking if you knew how to turn on the power."

The guard stared blankly at him.

"So I can test fire the rockets."

Still blank.

"So I can kill it."

Philips scrunched up his face, closing his eyes tight. Then he opened them again. "Sorry. I'm really not…" His bottom lipped wobbled precariously, but he took another calming breath and fought it down.

"I'm really not used to this," he said, offering only a weak smile as an apology.

Gordon smiled sympathetically, nodding.

"The only way I know to turn all that stuff on is to go out through those doors." He pointed to the open doorway leading to the inside of the rocket test chamber. "There are three floors inside there. This is the top floor. On the second floor you've got the fuel and oxygen supply. We get our power from a wind turbine on the same floor. It's… it's basically a giant fan. On the bottom floor you've got the main power generator, which works with the fan. Usually we just call down to get someone to turn them on, but…"

Gordon nodded. Communications were down all over the facility, and there were no guarantees that anyone was alive to take the calls down there anyway. He heaved himself to his feet, leaving Martha where she lay. For what he had in mind, he was going to need to run

very fast. Pausing at the doorway, he also removed the holster for his pistol. The HEV suit was stopping it from clinging properly to his body, and it ended up flapping about in a way that didn't make running easy.

That done, he continued on through the door.

"Wait."

He paused and turned to Philips.

"You're going down there?"

"It's the only way, right?"

"Well… well yeah, but… those things in there. What're you gonna do against them? They're bullet proof."

Gordon nodded again. He was beginning to feel like a donkey, he was nodding so much. "I've got an idea that might work."

"What if it doesn't?"

He thought for a moment. "Then it doesn't."

With no further comment, Gordon walked to the doorway leading into the chamber. Philips was right on the money. Through this doorway was a walkway platform that went immediately to the right, presumably to a ladder that led down. Below that was another walkway that went all the way around the chamber. There was a gap on the left where a ladder went down to the lower levels. Gordon didn't see a door on that walkway. Below that walkway, however, was a door. Sealed off by wooden planks, but still a doorway. Gordon did his best to see below that without getting his head removed. Below the walkway with the boarded up doorway was the ground floor. He squinted as he tried to see with further clarity.

He smiled. There, directly below the blocked doorway on the walkway above, was a clear and true doorway. He let out a little 'Ah'

noise of triumph. A monstrous tentacle beak suddenly turned and looked at him. It sliced down through the air and collided with the walkway in front of Gordon, getting stuck in the hole it created there.

Gordon backed up quickly, almost falling over the crate of grenades in the corner of the small room. The creature managed to wrest itself free of the platform, taking a quarter of the metal with it. It finally shook of the metal, letting it clang loudly to the ground. Not that anyone would have noticed that noise amidst the din the creatures themselves were creating.

So. Sound sensitive, with possibly weak eyesight. Gordon scooped up some grenades and piled them up in a corner just beside the doorway. Hoping his throwing arm was better than he gave himself credit for, Gordon pulled the pin from the grenade and tossed it into the chamber, aiming for the doorway that had been blocked off with wooden planks.

It bounced off one of the tentacle creatures and landed in the room at his feet. Gordon kicked it back out again and watched it explode in midair. He took cover in the other corner beside the doorway, not particularly wanting to step on a stack of fifteen grenades or so.

He peeked back around the corner. The tentacle creatures were swiping blindly at the spot where the grenade had exploded. Gordon smiled, which he realised he enjoyed doing. He hadn't smiled for so long, it felt like a luxury.

Gordon picked up another grenade and stood in the doorway. He tilted his arm back, hoping his aim would at least by somewhat on target this time. Then he realised something. The grenade still in his hand, he went back to Philips and crouched beside him. He wasn't looking particularly alive at the moment, simply staring at one point on the wall opposite him.

"I… could use some help."

Philips slowly looked at him, his expression blank. "To do what?"

"I need you to throw grenades and make a lot of noise." He placed the grenade in Philips' hand, closing his fingers around it.

The security guard looked down at the grenade and then back to Gordon. "What… what will you be doing?"

He stroked his beard contemplatively, trying to think of the best way of putting it.

"Running like crazy."

Within a few seconds, Gordon and Philips were at the doorway leading into the chamber. Philips tossed the grenade like an old baseball pro, lifting one leg in the manner Gordon had seen many professionals do on TV. He'd seen Barney trying to imitate them once or twice when he thought no-one was looking, although he would never admit it.

The grenade flew through the air and landed with expert precision just under the planks of wood blocking the doorway on the second floor. Gordon and Philips shared a desperate smile of accomplishment as it exploded, shattering all of the wood.

It certainly grabbed the attention of the tentacle monsters, who attacked the doorway like there was no tomorrow. Philips looked to Gordon with understanding now.

"Good listeners…"

Gordon nodded, and with some renewed enthusiasm, Philips scooped up another grenade. He looped his finger into the pin and got ready to pull it. He looked to Gordon and nodded to the left. Gordon returned the gesture. The walkway that went immediately right had been wrecked by one of the creatures, so Gordon had no choice but to leap straight from the doorway and to the next walkway down. Hopefully the HEV suit would take the brunt of the impact.

Philips pulled the pin and tossed the grenade to the right hand side of the chamber. Gordon ran and jumped to the left, not quite sure how to decrease the damage done to his body by the impact.

As his feet collided with the metal walkway and he fell head over heels forward, he heard the explosion of the grenade. What he *didn't* hear was any kind of ominous crack from his knees or ankles. Always a good thing. The tentacles didn't notice him, too busy pecking away at the imaginary enemy that had just tried to attack them.

He scrambled to the ladder, starting off on all fours before transforming his crawl into a sprint. He quickly latched onto the ladder and almost fell down the hole in his haste. His gloved hands easily gripped the rung in front of him, preventing his fall. Gordon let out a loud breath, puffing out his cheeks.

Apparently, that was enough noise to distract the tentacles away from their imaginary enemy. They turned to where Gordon clung helplessly to the ladder. He looked to the clear doorway, gambling his chances of survival against three tentacle monsters with beaks if he just ran for it.

Another explosion on the other side of the chamber took the decision out of his hands, drawing the monsters away. And so, Gordon ran, going so fast his shoulder collided with the doorframe as he went through. The impact made him turn around in mid run, his back ending up to the wall of the corridor he now stood in.

Breathless, Gordon stepped forward and looked up at Philips, giving him a thumbs up as he hunched over, resting his other hand on his knee. Philips just nodded in his acknowledgement.

Gordon took stock of his surroundings. This corridor glowed the welcoming green of toxic waste. The corridor itself was in fact a platform just like the ones outside the chamber, except these had that pleasing wire mesh effect that let people see down at what they could possibly fall into. Doing so, Gordon saw the same toxic waste

that had surrounded the chamber outside, except just that little bit closer. Lovely.

Rather than think up any more ways he could die today, Gordon walked on, trying not to ponder what he would do against any alien threats he came across without even a crowbar for company.

At the far end of the corridor, Gordon spotted an open door, leading into another airlock. He presumed that it would take him outside the chamber itself, just a floor lower than where he began. Gordon went through, wondering why he hadn't bumped into any more aliens.

The door opened, and he was outside the rocket test chamber, once again basked in the glow of the moat of toxic waste beneath him. A walkway in front of him led to a corridor. The walkway, unfortunately, already had a passenger in the form of a zombie. It didn't seem to notice him, simply standing idly around, its' long claw-like fingers dangling, almost as though bored. As seemed the norm in this place, there was no railing to hold on to, the walkway simply relying on the fact that those that used it had incredible balance.

Gordon sighed and pushed up his glasses. He was getting increasingly tired of these insurmountable obstacles. He cracked his neck to the left and then to the right. Then he ran at the zombie, diving for his legs and wrapping his arms around the ankles. As hard as he could manage, he squeezed them together and tried to tip the zombie over the edge. The zombie had barely realised what was going on before it was sent moaning and writhing to the toxic waste below. Gordon had no idea if zombies were more resilient against multi-storey drops (or to toxic waste), but if he was honest, either of those fates couldn't be worse for the human inside than staying alive.

With a grunt, Gordon heaved himself to his feet and instinctively dusted himself off before proceeding onwards into the corridor. It led into a darkened room that made Gordon squint. On his left was another corridor with a lit metal door at the end. On the right hand wall were two pipes, one red and the other blue. Gordon assumed

that red was for fuel, blue for oxygen. All that he cared about was the fact that they led to the lit door, which meant, for once, something simple.

Feeling somewhat heartened by the small mercies fate was throwing him amidst this living hell, Gordon walked over to the door with halfway confident strides. The door didn't open for him. There was no control panel to open it either. For a few seconds, Gordon was silent, just staring blankly ahead at the heavy metal slab that stood between him and one of his many goals. Then, with a sigh, he rested his head against the cool metal of the door.

"I really… really… hate you."

He turned wearily and walked into the darkness. On the far side of the room, Gordon could see a railing that seemed to be part of a tiny balcony overlooking a small room beneath. There wasn't much in the small room but a rather large grating. Beneath it was a ladder that descended into the bowels of the… place where he was. Gordon wasn't exactly sure what to call it. Lab, office, something like that. His brain was beginning to flag on the details. He reached up and rubbed his eyes beneath his glasses, really feeling like he could use some coffee.

Gordon looked around him. There was a hole in the ground beside him, a ladder leading into the room with the grating. Without even thinking about it, lowered himself down, hopping off the last few steps to land on the ground just that little bit quicker.

Two zombies stood on either side of him.

"Wah!"

With an energy he hadn't been feeling before, Gordon darted around the ladder and to the garden table sized grating in the floor, gripping some rungs with both hands. With a cry of effort, Gordon heaved it out. The zombies were almost open him, wandering seemingly aimlessly, but still with him as their overall target. They were stood

next to each other, so Gordon simply pushed the grating to them, as though passing it to a friend to hold while he worked on something. He slipped inside the hole and clambered down the ladder as fast as his fear of heights would allow. The bottom of this cylindrical hole in the ground was at least fifteen feet down.

After a surprisingly short trek downwards, Gordon reached the bottom and found himself in a dank cavern. It was shaped like a tall rectangle, but with a curved top, like a semi circle. He was stood on what looked like an incredibly slippery pipe that led down the cavern and went to the left and the right at the end. Beneath him was a layer of water that would be lucky to come up to his ankles if he was stood in it.

With nary a deep breath of preparation, Gordon went onwards. After only a few slips, Gordon reached the junction and opted on a left turn, simply because Barney would have insisted on going right. Every single time they were on their way somewhere, Barney would just *insist* on going right. It was almost like a compulsion.

The pipe turned right, and after that turn, Gordon saw a ladder that would lead him up into whatever obstacle the lovely Black Mesa facility had prepared for him.

Not for the first time, Gordon wondered if Barney was even alive, let alone insisting to some hapless scientist under his care that they *have* to go right. He wondered what had become of Dr Kleiner in the wake of the disaster. Or Eli. Eli with the wife and daughter. How was a baby like Alyx supposed to survive in a place like this?

Gordon shook the thoughts from his head as he clambered up the ladder and came to another grate above him, just as big as the one he had forced upon the two zombies before. It was surprisingly easy to dislodge it, but pushing it aside was the 'bitch', as Barney would no doubt put it. The scientist climbed out and took a breath, and clapped eyes on another zombie standing over him.

There were a lot of zombies in this place.

At a lack of options, Gordon did a repeat performance of his tackle from earlier, this time tilting the zombie so he would fall down the hole that Gordon himself had just clambered out of. Amazingly, it worked. Gordon continued on and came upon a metal door. His spirits almost fell again when he noticed the control panel next door. With a relived sigh and a smile, he pressed the 'open' button. It groaned open, reflecting both the age and the power of the door. *Nothing* got through these things without authorisation.

Including the two zombies on the other side.

Now it was just getting annoying. Gordon groaned and took a step back. The zombies practically fell over themselves trying to get to him. He waited until they were both stood in the doorway when he pressed the 'close' button. The door was unrelenting in its efforts to close, crushing the two zombies into each other before they even had a chance to make a grunt of displeasure.

Something inside him helped bypass the vomiting reflex, and Gordon pressed the 'open' button, heading on into the chamber beyond. It was yet another large cylindrical chamber, with a walkway that ran around the circumference. There was a ladder on the other side that led down past the huge fan to a walkway beneath that led to the base of said huge fan.

As Gordon found after climbing down the ladder, the control switch to turn on the fan was beneath it. So, naturally, Gordon had to turn the fan on, then climb up the ladder and past the huge deadly fan blades of death before they went fast enough to turn him into paste.

Naturally.

Feeling twenty years older than he was, Gordon pressed the green button to turn on the fan and sprinted to the ladder, climbing as fast as he could while still trying to keep his body as flat to the wall as he could. He could have sworn he felt the fan blade swipe at his back, but through some miracle, Gordon managed to reach the circular walkway unscathed.

Someone up there wanted him alive. Probably to suffer more.

The fan was really building up speed now, and Gordon wondered where the hell he was supposed to go to reach the fuel and oxygen switches. Then he looked up. At the very top of the chamber were innumerable planks of wood, obviously covering something up. Through the gaps, Gordon could swear he could see what looked like a very wide air vent cover.

He felt a little like Charlie in the chocolate factory as he leapt out on top of the fan, letting the wind blow him up to the top. The fan had picked up a surprising amount of speed in a short time. So much so, in fact, that it propelled Gordon up to the roof so fast he cracked through most of the planks blocking his path.

Gordon felt like saying many things as he was impaled to the grated ceiling by the strong winds. Only one came out through.

"Ow."

On his right, Gordon could indeed see a wide air vent cover. Hooking his fingers into the grated surface of the ceiling, Gordon managed to crawl upside down to the cover. With a grunt, he prised it off and slipped inside. The wind that had been keeping him aloft now out of the way, Gordon fell into the vent in a somewhat ungraceful manner. He licked his very dry lips and tried to get some moisture back in his throat.

Now he could *really* use a coffee.

A headcrab leapt out of the darkness at him. Suddenly feeling quite irritable, Gordon grabbed it with both hands and tossed it out of the opening like a football. He watched for a few seconds in some amusement as it floundered against the gale force winds of the turbine fan.

Then he got his mind back on more serious things and crawled onwards through the air vent, every shuffling movement echoing

loudly down the thin metal passage. Something about it was rather therapeutic, surprisingly. Small air vents were the one constant Gordon had come to rely on throughout the facility, and they actually had a strange, calming effect on him. They reminded him of times before the incident. Before his life was just about survival.

God, was that just this morning?

Gordon had no idea what time it was now. Had a day passed? Two days? He physically felt like it.

The vent came to an abrupt - and, for Gordon, somewhat disappointing - end, and after pushing the vent cover off, Gordon stepped out onto a seemingly pointless platform in a narrow room. At the end of the platform was a ladder that led to the room beneath, where a doorway stood at the far end, which, really, wasn't very far at all. Cautiously, he climbed down and went through.

There, on his right, was a control panel with two red buttons on the surface, beside one button a blue light labelled 'OXY' and red light labelled 'FUEL'.

There were also four zombies in the room. Gordon had no intention of trying to tackle all of them to the ground, and so settled for sprinting to the control panel and slamming his palms down on both buttons at the same time. With and affirmative and uplifting bleep, the lights came on, and the entire control panel sprang to life. Without even a glance back at the approaching predators, Gordon noticed a door on the wall on his right, beside the doorway he had just entered through. And, happily, there was a control pad beside it.

Without a thought, Gordon ran to it opened it. As he stepped through it and closed it, he realised it was the first locked door he had come across. But why would they only have a control panel on the one side?

Some of these scientists were smart, but good God, they could be dim.

It took Gordon less than a few minutes to the return to the rocket test chamber, where the tentacle monsters were still making the same banging din, punctuated by the occasional haunting, monstrous call.

He stood in the doorway, safely beyond their fatal reach. Gordon tried to think. Where was the next door? He knew it was below him, but where exactly? In the same place as this door, or on the opposite side of the chamber?

"Hey!"

With a frown, he looked up to the doorway on the top walkway. Philips stood there, waving largely with both hands. The creatures took notice of his noisy announcement and started banging against the walkway in front of him. Unnerved but not undeterred, Philips cupped his hands around his mouth.

"It's below you!"

Gordon gave him a thumbs up and a nod. Philips continued yelling incoherently at the monsters, attracting them to him while Gordon ran out onto the walkway and went into a skid, dropping off the walkway and onto the ground floor. The HEV suit beeped in protest, alerting him to a minor fracture, but Gordon ignored it. He didn't have time to run to the ladder and climb down, and in any case, the suit would take care of the damage while he walked.

Thankfully, the doorway on the ground floor wasn't boarded shut as the one above had been, and Gordon wasted no time sprinting inside. He was even closer to the lake of toxic waste now. Gordon continued on down the very familiar seeming corridor and went through the airlock.

Once again, he found himself on another thin, rail-less walkway, but with a merciful lack of aliens. Gordon actually found himself feeling tenser. He continued on down the corridor. A power cable ran the length of the corridor and around the corner. Some water pipes had burst somehow, and a pool of water had spread out across a good

portion of the corridor ahead of Gordon. The power cable dangled dangerously close to the broken pipe, and what appeared to be a crack in the casing meant that as soon as the power came back on, that water would be electrified. With a sigh of resignation, Gordon kept on going.

He turned another corner left, where a doorway waited at the end of the corridor on the right. He went through and was immediately taken aback at how big the place was. It looked like it was used for cargo transport down to the lower levels, although what cargo could be taken to a power generator, Gordon didn't know. His attention was on the bull… squid thing with the tentacle mouth in the corner of the room. It was feasting on the remains of a dead scientist and hadn't noticed him yet.

After taking one step into the room, Gordon froze. Ropes were lowering themselves from the ceiling. He took a step back and turned his suit's flashlight on, pointing it upwards. It was those barnacle creatures, like the one he had mistaken for a rope during his fight with the soldiers. Except these were *everywhere* . It would take a great deal of caution for him to circumnavigate them all, and caution was something he couldn't afford with the bullsquid creature in there with him. Then he thought of something.

Sneaking into the room, Gordon positioned himself so between himself and the bullsquid was the thickest collection of barnacles in the room. Then he clapped loudly.

"Hello!"

The bullsquid turned with an indignant grunt, and quickly started towards him. Before it knew what was going on, three barnacle tentacles had latched onto it and were heaving it up. It writhed and squealed like a pig as it was torn in three different directions. Rather than linger on the pain the thing must have been going through, Gordon focused on sliding through the remaining barnacles and reaching the platform on the right hand side of the room.

The latticework grating beneath him left little to the imagination insofar as how high up he was. It was yet another large cylindrical chamber, a pool of toxic waste lying below. A control panel sprouted out of the platform beside the very edge. Wondering why his hand wasn't shaking, Gordon pressed the button on the panel to summon the elevator, which he curiously couldn't see below him. For a few seconds, nothing happened. Then lights began to come on at the bottom of the chamber. Gradually, like a wave travelling up towards him, the lights began switch on one tier at a time until the entire chamber was lit.

Not that it was anything to look at when it was lit up, either. Dull grey was dull grey. He heard a groaning noise from above him, and saw an elevator coming down. It was attached to a cable, the apparatus lowering it concealed by shadow. Well, he said elevator. One side was just open, while all the other sides had huge viewports that anyone could fall out of accidentally from the slightest slip. For a place that handled such delicate equipment, they certainly weren't stringent about safety. Gordon wondered if it was just this older part of the facility, or if Anomalous Materials had been this unsafe and he just hadn't noticed.

Pushing it aside for now, Gordon stepped in and pushed the single button next to the gaping doorway. With a shudder that rattled the whole elevator, the suspended box eventually complied, lowering him down the chamber. After a few seconds of peaceful downward travel, Gordon smiled. This wasn't so bad.

Then the elevator stopped suddenly, tilting dangerously from side to side.

Feeling like he was being toyed with, Gordon looked around, and saw a ladder running the entire height of the chamber. He propped his feet up on the ledge of one of the viewports and kicked off, leaping towards the ladder. His hands managed to latch on, and his body slammed into the wall in a manner which was, to say the least, inconvenient. Then the elevator cable snapped, and it fell into the

depths of the chamber before finding a sticky end in the pool of toxic waste below.

At least, Gordon assumed toxic waste was sticky. With a shrug, he climbed down the chamber, feeling somewhat safer being in control of his own descent instead of relying on decades old machinery.

At the bottom was a stone platform that looked far sturdier than the metal latticework one above. In the right hand corner of the room stood a scientist with what could only be described as a bushy tuft of hair sticking out the back, his bald head shining against the light of the panel in front of him. Gordon made his way over, thankful for some more human contact.

The scientist was studying some dials on the panel, and from what Gordon could see, there were no controls. Gordon cleared his throat, making the scientist jump before finding the source of the noise and calming himself. The scientist thumped his chest melodramatically.

"Goodness. You scared me witless for a moment there."

"Sorry."

He looked Gordon up and down and smiled, nodding approvingly. "Ah, you have a HEV suit. That should be useful."

He steeled himself up for whatever deadly task awaited him. "Useful… for what?"

"Why, for surviving this mess, of course!"

That took Gordon aback. "Oh. Right."

The scientist sighed and returned to looking at the dials. "You know, I hope no-one expects *me* to start up the generator. Smithers went down there and never came back."

Gordon sighed. Too good to be true, just as he had suspected.

"Where is it?" he sighed.

"What?"

"The generator room."

"Oh. Just down that corridor and on the left." The scientist pointed an bony finger towards the passageway behind Gordon, which bent immediately off to the right.

With only a nod of confirmation, Gordon walked off in that direction, feeling like a sulky teenager. He followed the corridor to its eventual end, which was an opening into a silo not unlike the one the tentacle monsters now inhabited. Except, instead of a walkway going around the circumference of the chamber on his floor, a small platform, barely big enough to accommodate one person stood waiting for a passenger, a control panel sprouting from the front. They looked like little Segways. And there were guardrails! If Gordon ever got out of this, he would find a lawyer somewhere and sue the Black Mesa company, not for the aliens, the soldiers or the constant peril, but for the lack of damned guardrails.

The platform seemed to run along a rail that ran the right side of the chamber, and led to a ladder on the other side. Above him was a normal walkway that *did* run the area of the chamber. But there was another platform running along that walkway. It looked like it was out of control, going at high speeds from side to the other, only stopping for a precious few seconds on either side of the ladder from below before setting off in the other direction again.

Gordon stepped onto the platform and pressed the button. With a little jerk, the platform came to life and rocketed him around to the other side. He waited for a few moments before prising his fists from their vice grip on the guardrail and climbing up the ladder. As he reached the top, he looked around. There was another ladder on the left hand side of the walkway leading up to what Gordon assumed was the generator. It was a platform that bridged from one side of the chamber to the other, a circular shape bulging in the middle.

The out of control Segway platform was still whipping around the walkway at deadly speed. Gordon noticed that it cut in front of the ladder that he needed to get up.

"Of course it does," he muttered. He waited for the platform to get around to his left side. After it launched away to get to the right side, Gordon guessed he would have enough time to run to the ladder and get up it before the platform returned and ran him over. The platform came to a clanging halt on the left hand side of the ladder. It launched away again, and Gordon propelled himself from the ladder and almost tripped over himself in his haste to reach his target.

In a moment of rare ease, Gordon managed to climb halfway up the ladder before the platform had come back around. With a self-impressed smile, Gordon climbed up to the generator.

Feeling very unsafe, Gordon crawled on all fours up the stone platform towards the generator. A red button cried out to be pressed, so he did so. The circular bulge was in fact a fairly hefty looking squat shaped cylinder, and Gordon had to clamber up and over it to reach the red button which Gordon assumed was on the other side. As he got up on to, he came face to face with another bespectacled scientist, a sheen of sweat on his forehead.

"This is my hiding spot," he said urgently, the way in which he crawled around the generator making him look like a nervous dog. "And I'm not moving until the situation is drastically improved. Now go away!" he commanded, waving Gordon away. "And don't tell anyone I'm here!"

Gordon opened his mouth to try and convince him otherwise, but thought better of it. No danger could come to him here, and trying to force him would just be stressful for all concerned. He would tell his friend back in the control room about him, and that would be that. Gordon crawled to the other side of the generator and pushed the red button there as well.

The generator thrummed to life and Gordon climbed back over the generator to the ladder. Apparently, turning on the generator stopped whatever was making the platform go insane, so any caution Gordon approached the walkway with was removed.

By some miracle, the journey back was uneventful. The scientist said something incredibly stupid along the lines of "Someone has restored all power," which made Gordon want to hurt him. The fact that the scientist said it with a great deal of wonder made it even more irritating, somehow. But, instead of hurting him, Gordon settled for telling the scientist where his friend Smithers really was.

The scientist didn't seem surprised, and looked like he was considering doing the same thing himself.

Gordon took the ladder back up the chamber and negotiated his way past both the maze of barnacles and the now electrified pool of water in the corridor. He wouldn't have thought taking a running jump in such a manner would have worked, but there he was, crossing the bridge to the rocket test lab.

Before long he was stood on the bottom floor of the silo, wondering how he could signal to Philips that he was ready. With a weary shrug, Gordon settled for yelling incoherently. The tentacle monsters replied by slamming their fifty ton beaks down into the ground in front of him. Then they became distracted, and the three red eyed creatures turned their attention to the top floor. Gordon could *just* hear Philips making as much noise as he could.

Never been known for being a time waster, Gordon ran to the ladder and climbed up to the next level, quickly darting into the doorway on that floor. One of the tentacle monsters glanced back at him as he went inside, but was far too distracted by Philips to do much else about it. Gordon took in the situation ahead of him.

On the right was a ladder that would take him up to the second floor. And then, almost entirely on the other side of the chamber, was a ladder that led up to the walkway that Philips was trying his best not

to occupy, lest he be eviscerated by angry green tentacle monsters. He checked once more that the monsters weren't concentrated on him, then sprinted to the ladder. He slipped on one of the rungs, but otherwise was pretty swift.

And then he ran again, knowing that the creatures would be facing him but hoping beyond hopes that Philips was making enough noise.

He wasn't.

Just as Gordon reached the ladder, a monstrous beak slammed down into the walkway in front of him. He backed up as fast as he could, when another break sliced through the air and crashed into the metal floor behind him. The third was getting ready to strike when an explosion sounded from the opposite side of the chamber. Gordon spotted another grenade being tossed from the walkway above him, again landing on the far side of the chamber.

After the second explosion, the creatures turned their attention to the imaginary enemy behind them, and Gordon scrambled up the ladder faster than he would have thought possible of himself. He sprinted into the doorway, almost knocking Philips over as he went through. Gordon wanted to collapse. He was spent, he knew it. The adrenalin would wear off soon, and then he would just fall into a coma for a few days.

But not yet.

"You okay?" Philips asked, smiling in happiness and disbelief.

Gordon offered a breathless nod, resting his hands on his knees. God, he jogged regularly and ran marathons. He shouldn't be this exhausted.

"Good, because I was out of grenades."

That elicited a small smile from the exhausted scientist. He went through the doorway in front of him. He scooped up Martha and the

pistol, still snug in its holster. Having weapons again felt good. Gordon didn't even bother to think about the moral ramifications of such a feeling as he climbed down the ladder and walked to the control room, followed by Philips.

The control room was lit up again, just as it had been when Gordon first entered it. Hopefully he would have more luck with this endeavour than the first scientist did. The 'POWER', 'FUEL' and 'OXY' lights were all shining hopefully, and Gordon walked to the red button between them that held the glorious label 'TEST FIRE' printed above it. He slammed his fist down on it.

Klaxons sounded, and the doors on either side of the control room slammed shut automatically. Gordon indicated to Philips to get in the far corner of the room, while he took the other. They needed to be as far away from the heat as possible. He scrunched his eyes shut as he heard the engines start up.

"Close your eyes!" he yelled.

"Already doing it!" Philips yelled back.

And then the rockets fired. The monsters roared and moaned in agony as they were burnt to a crisp. The blackness that surrounded Gordon grew white from the intense light, and he could feel the heat even through his HEV suit.

Then, suddenly, it was over. The noise was gone. All Gordon could hear was the crackling of something burning. A pungent smell was wafting its way into his nose, but he ignored it. Slowly, cautiously, he opened his eyes. He looked over to Philips, who was still tucked into a protective ball.

"It's okay," Gordon assured, getting to his feet and walking to the viewing port. The monsters were gone. Philips was by his side shortly.

"Take that, you bastards," he muttered, and then he gave Gordon a happy hug.

"Oh, um… okay," he managed, feeling a little awkward.

Philips released Gordon from his embrace. "Sorry. Just… happy to have those things gone."

Gordon looked down to the hole in at the bottom of the test chamber where the creatures had sprouted from. He guessed that was where he was heading, and readjusted Martha on his shoulder.

"I'll… see you later, I suppose."

"Huh?"

"I'm… going. Down there."

Philips looked to the hole in the silo. "Damn," he admired, smiling and shaking his head at Gordon. "You don't stop, do you?"

"Can't."

The security guard just nodded at that. "Mind if I come along?"

Gordon blinked. "Sorry?"

"Do you mind if I come along? You know, to help you?"

A volunteer? Gordon was getting a volunteer? And one that *wasn't* mentally unstable? He felt like hugging Philips.

Instead, he just pushed his glasses up his nose and nodded.

Both of them feeling somewhat safer with a companion to watch out for them, Gordon and Philips made their way down to the bottom of the silo and lowered themselves into the caverns below.

"What's down here?" Gordon asked, immediately surprised at the way the ground sloped beneath him.

"Don't know. Never really had a reason to climb down here."

Gordon wasn't sure whether the security guard was being ironic or not, but decided to let the comment lie either way. After a few minutes more of sliding and downward climbing, they came to a ledge that was at least twenty stories. At the bottom was a perfectly circular pool of water. No way to tell how deep it was, unfortunately.

"We jumping?" Philips asked from he was crouched at the ledge, looking down.

He thought of some nice way to put it before replying.

"Yes."

"Thought so."

Gordon tossed Martha and his pistol down the chasm first, not wanting one of them swinging around his body upon impact with the water and knocking him out. Or interfering with his swimming, for that matter.

"Can we survive that?" he asked Philips.

"Hell, I don't know. You're the doctor."

"Scientist."

"Same thing, right?"

"Not… really."

"Oh. Didn't know that."

"Oh. Okay."

The pair were silent for a moment.

"So," Philips said, pointing a thumb to the chasm. "Shall we, uh?"

Gordon nodded. The two took a few steps back before running out and leaping off the ledge. What was that movie Barney had loaned him?

" *I can't swim!"*

" *Don't be stupid, it's the fall that'll kill you!"*

Well, Gordon *could* swim, so it was kind of redundant.

And then he was in the water, shooting down into the greenish pool like a bullet. The impact knocked the breath out of him, and he quickly pushed his way back up to the surface. Philips was already there waiting for him as he launched out of the water, gasping for breath. Philips whooped like a teenager. Actually, on closer inspection, Philips practically *was* a teenager. Gordon wondered how young Black Mesa was hiring nowadays.

They were in a very dark, small cave. The HEV suit's Geiger counter was crackling away, and Gordon realised why. Several toppled crates of radioactive material lay around the pool. None of the green liquid had reached the water, but it was only a matter of time.

"We should keep on swimming."

Philips was still panting. "Huh? Why?"

A nod to the radioactive drums was Gordon's only response. Philips turned and saw them, then looked back to Gordon with increasing alarm.

"Shit!"

And with that, he dove down. Gordon followed.

The pool was about twenty feet deep, and at the bottom lay the charred stump of what Gordon assumed was the tentacle creature. The water was warmer near the stump. In little time, Gordon found Martha and his handgun, although the holster had disappeared somewhere.

On the right and left hand side of the bottom of the pool were some smaller, carved out caverns in the white porcelain. Three on one side, three on the other. Philips had already taken the right hand side, and Gordon reluctantly followed, hoping he wasn't following a security guard to an early grave. Maybe it wasn't just Barney who liked to turn right. Maybe it was a security division thing. The archways on the right hand side led to a thin rectangular passageway that immediately went up. Gordon could make out a light source at the top, and followed his eager companion up. Maybe right *was* correct now and again.

They both emerged gasping for air, and Philips wasted no time in heaving himself out of the water and offering his hand to Gordon. Encumbered with Martha like he was, he appreciated the lift. They wonderful green light of toxic waste surrounded them. They were stood on a platform that overlooked a river of the stuff, drums of radioactive material floating along down the river like ducks. It looked like some twisted sewer. A large pipe ran over the river and led around the corner. A ladder led up to the pipe, and Philips led the way.

It was sort of nice to have someone else making he decisions. Until this point Gordon had been relying on his own instincts, and he had been beginning to doubt how much longer they could have kept him alive. But now he had someone with training on his side, and he felt much safer for it.

The pipe was as thick as a truck, but the two walked along it as though it were a tightrope. They turned the corner to the left, and Gordon could make out that the 'sewer' opened up into a much bigger chamber at the end. They reached the end and Philips cursed quietly at how high up they were.

"Jesus, this place is like the grand canyon," he muttered, before shaking his head and continuing onwards.

The river of toxic waste became a waterfall at the end of the 'sewer', falling into a pool at the very bottom of the chamber. An equally thick pipe ran across the middle of the chamber, connected to the pipe they were now walking on. Gordon could see an opening on the top of it not unlike the ones he had used earlier.

Except that this time, Gordon knew about the ladder, and his somewhat smug expression when he climbed down into the pipe confused Philips. The two wandered into the darkened tunnel, and Gordon flipped on his flashlight. They turned a corner.

"Where are we headed, by the way?"

"The Lambda complex."

"Why?"

"They're trying to find a way to stop this. And… I was told I could trust them."

"Trust them? What's that mean?"

Gordon looked over at him, realising that Philips wouldn't have known. Of course he wouldn't, he was stuck in that chamber with those tentacle things since this mess started. How could he know what the military were doing? Quietly and reluctantly, Gordon told him about the soldiers that had entered the Black Mesa facility, eradicating 'evidence' as they went.

Philips, obviously a big believer that the army were on his side, looked like he had been punched in the gut. He didn't ask many questions as they continued on. The one question he did ask was nothing to do with the army.

"Did you hear that?"

Gordon stopped and listened. He could hear it. A steady creaking, all around them. After a cautious look back at his companion, Gordon took a step forward, closely followed by Philips.

There was another creak. Then, with a massive crash, the pipe gave way, and they fell.

(A/N: Now *this* took way too long, I wholeheartedly agree with you readers on this. And I have no other excuse except for real life intruding on this chapter, which, admittedly, was already a bitch to write.

Anyway, review (even if it's just to say how late I am)!

Next Chapter: *Focal Point* . Barney visits the alien world of Xen!)

Focal Point

Disclaimer: I don't own *Half-Life.*

(A/N: Hhgbh? Does beta work. Much appreciated? Yes.)

The Black Mesa Incident

Chapter Twelve: Focal Point

"-IIIIIT!"

Barney landed with a thud. The ground was neither particularly hard or soft. It was just… there. He slowly got to his feet, his breath shaky as his eyes took in his surroundings.

"Oh… Jesus, Mary, Mother of God…" he sang under his breath.

He was on an alien world. Barney Calhoun, security guard, who liked nothing more than a beer with some macaroni cheese, was on an alien world. The sky was green and grey, and the landscape around him had the same colour motif, if a bit darker. He was on what he assumed was an island, because the ground just stopped a few feet ahead of him.

God, he felt dizzy. He felt he had the right, though. He *was* on an alien world, after all. What was it called, he wondered? Considering that it was probably scientists like Gordon and Dr Kleiner who found it, they probably just numbered it and that was that.

Stupid boring scientists. It was their fault he was on 'Alien World 5B', or whatever the hell crappy name they came up with. His legs feeling shaky, Barney walked over to where the island seemingly ended. The cut from where the soldier had sliced into his leg burned from the 'fresh' air, and Barney hissed. He paused.

Wait a minute. Rosenberg had given him a first aid kit. The security guard scanned the ground around where he landed, but found nothing. Come to think of it, where was the M4 he brought with him? He thought while he limped to the edge of the island, hopping every once in a while when he got tired of the pain in his leg. He *was* thrown to the ground pretty roughly… maybe the first aid kit and the gun had been thrown away in different directions. He'd probably find them littered around the area.

Which was great, except his frickin' leg was *killing him.*

Barney reached the edge and let out a loud exclamation when he saw nothing down below him. Just sky. Above, around, and below. Well, he meant to make a loud exclamation. All that came out was a whimpered 'momma'.

If he fell, he wouldn't hit anything. He would just fall forever until he hit left the planet. If this *was* a planet. If not, he would just end up floating in nothingness for the rest of his life.

Which didn't really appeal.

With a shake of his head, Barney backed away and decided to do some exploring. He had a job to do. The sooner he did it, the sooner Rosenberg would open one of those crackly green portal things, pull him back, and they would be on their way back to… alien invasions and military war zones.

Maybe I should take my time.

A bridge made of - well, Barney assumed it was the alien equivalent of rock - ran above his head, beginning up on the right hand side of the high cliff-face in front of him and curved around - held up by blue-ish white pillars - to the other side. There two caves on either side of the cliff-face where the bridge met it, and Barney could see the golden glow of the crystals Rosenberg had been talking about coming from a cavern on the right hand side. A seemingly random

jumble of rocks lay beneath the right hand side of the bridge, and Barney figured they would make a handy climbing frame.

Barney checked his holster. The revolver was still there, held steadfast by the awkward way Barney had jammed it in there earlier. After a crick of his neck, Barney limped over to the rocks.

What looked like a tree was planted next to them. It was fleshy coloured, and looked like a question mark, just with a very sharp, pointed end. Deciding that admiring the shrubbery wouldn't get his job done any quicker, Barney clambered up onto the rocks that led to the rest of the bridge. Barney heard a low creaking noise, and turned in time to see the pointed end of the tree stabbing down at him.

"Holy Christ!"

The razor sharp point went straight through his already injured leg at the thigh. Barney screamed in pain. The tree withdrew smoothly from his leg and was coming down for another attack when Barney scrambled up the rocks and further, adrenalin and survival instinct overriding the gunshot wound in his arm and pulling him up until he was on the bridge the tree was well below him. Barney looked back at it. The tree was swaying idly in some imaginary breeze, his blood staining the tip of its blade.

His leg bled profusely onto the ground. It had been bleeding pretty badly *before*, but now… With a grunt of effort, he tore off some of the material from his shirt sleeve up to his bicep, and wrapped it around the hole in his leg. He tied a knot above the wound, and, after taking a few deep breaths, finished the knot with an almighty tug.

"HOLY! FRICKIN'! CHEESEBURGER! HAM!"

His voice echoed around the landscape. Barney lay on his back for a few minutes, staring up at the green-grey sky. Well, if nothing knew he was here before, they definitely knew now. And he was in *such* good shape to take on any huge alien monsters that thought he looked tasty.

Because he was Barney the security guard. And he was going to die on an alien world. Whoopee for him. Spilling blood on a whole new frontier. Gordon would be so proud. But Gordon *wouldn't* be proud of him lying down and taking death without a fight. No, Barney would poke Death in the eye, kick him in the nuts, and mess around with his face in a 'Mel Gibson in Lethal Weapon' style.

And to do that, Barney decided he would have to get to his feet. So, with a heavy grunt and a loud curse that very few people in his life would have approved of, Barney heaved himself to his feet and limped onwards down the stone bridge and to the cave that was lit by the golden crystals.

He couldn't remember if they gave off radiation or not, but Barney erred on the side of caution and stayed as far away from them as he could as he walked. Feeling a little bit paranoid, he cupped his hand in front of his crotch. He would like to be able to have kids someday, if only to regale them with stories about how their Dad survived the Black Mesa Incident. Barney smiled. 'Black Mesa Incident'. He liked that. Maybe he'd write an autobiography when he got out.

The cave led to a dead end, opening up directly above his head. It got darker the further up Barney tried to look, but he could swear he could see a hole in the wall five feet or so above his head. But, since he wasn't a giant, Barney sighed and hobbled back out of the cave and back onto the bridge, following it around its curve and to the other, considerably darker cave.

Now *this* cave was tiny. He reached down to his belt and pulled out his flashlight, which was, to his relief, still there. There wasn't much to look at in there. There was a hole in the wall at ground level, almost like an air duct.

"What is it with me and air ducts today?" he muttered as he limped over to it and attempted to kneel. The best he could manage was to squat on his uninjured left leg and stick his right out straight. The 'air duct' cover had the texture of onion rings and the look of pretzels, brown material weaving in and out into a twisted latticework.

It snapped out of place easily enough, and Barney clambered inside, his leg helpfully causing him indescribable amounts of pain every time it came into contact with the floor. Which was, conveniently, pretty much all the time.

Rosenberg better have a six pack and an incredibly sexy hooker waiting for me when I get back.

The confining tunnel was lit by the yellow crystals as well, the structures coming out of the walls in clumps every so often. They weren't too much fun for the old leg to get over either, come to think of it. Barney turned a corner, and the tunnel had a steady decline before him that ended up being about 45 degrees. He grunted as he heaved himself around the corner.

Almost immediately, his hands slipped and he slid down the surprisingly slick surface of the downward angled tunnel. His panic overrode the pain in his leg, and Barney tried to spread his legs out to stop his rapid descent. The walls were just as slippery as the floor. Barney was suddenly engulfed in liquid that felt like water but tasted far worse. And he was still moving forward. He tried to surface but simply ended up grazing his hands against the roof of the tunnel.

His injured leg stopped him from swimming against the current, so Barney let himself relax and allowed the current to take him where it may. Within a few seconds, Barney's head was above water. The river was still going down, and for a brief moment, Barney felt like he was at a water park. If water parks used water that smelt like one part rancid water, one part mud and one part crap.

He landed with a noise that settled between a thud and a splash, the downward incline of the tunnel giving way to a more straightforward direction. The current was just as strong, however, and Barney still found himself hurtling out of control. He whizzed around a corner and saw light at the end of the tunnel. A smile crossed his lips until he saw realised where the tunnel actually came out.

Barney yelled in panic as he was launched from the mouth of the tunnel and into the air, following the thin waterfall down into the lake of brown liquid below. He splashed down with all arms flailing, the impact knocking the breath out of him. After a few moments to assess whether he was in fact alive or not, Barney surfaced with a loud gasp and swam over an island in the middle of the 'lake'. He managed to clamber out only using his arms, his leg stinging maliciously as it dragged against the gritty surface of the floor.

He lay on his back, taking in his surroundings as he tried his best to breathe. He was in a much bigger cave, almost a lagoon. The ceiling was high enough for it to be a mall. Another waterfall on the opposite side of the cavern from the one he had entered in spewed the same brown liquid, with, Barney assumed, the same lovely smell. Golden yellow crystals peppered the surface of the cavern, giving it an almost candlelit romantic quality. Except for the smell of shit everywhere, that tended to be a bit of a mood killer.

Then Barney noticed something. There was no exit. No 'air ducts', no openings, nothing.

"Fantastic," he said quietly, repeating it louder afterwards to confirm that this cave at least allowed echoes. He could have some fun with that while he starved to death in here.

He studied the room some more, still remaining on his back. The waterfall opposite the one he had entered from had a bigger tunnel. From the look of it he would probably stand up in there. If he could have reached it. It was literally eight or nine stories above him, which wouldn't have been a problem if the rock wall beneath it had allowed any kind of climbing. But from the looks of it, the wall was as slick and slippery as the stuff Barney had slid down earlier. The wall jutted out just beneath the tunnel entrance, too, which would mean Barney would have to do some mighty impressive gymnastics to get around it and into the tunnel.

So. Plan B.

Plan B being 'starve to death whilst amusing oneself with echoing voice'.

Barney sat up, keeping his injured leg straight while bringing his left one up. He rested back, putting his hands behind him on the ground. His hands suddenly flew off the ground, accompanied by a loud noise akin to a large balloon being suddenly inflated. With a yelp, Barney tried to get up, instead managing to put all of his weight on his injured leg and toppling over in a slightly ungracious manner.

After a few muttered curses, Barney got up and looked at the ground where he had rested his hands. A circular indentation about the size of a round kitchen table lay in front of him, raised slightly from the rest of the ground. It looked like a speaker on a stereo system. Experimentally, Barney picked up a rock and tossed it onto the fleshy coloured circle. Nothing. It just bounced over the tightly wound surface.

He picked up another rock and tossed it down at the circle with a lot more force. Suddenly, with that same inflating noise, the indentation became just the opposite, becoming a hump in the ground that fired the rock into the air. It flew up well past the entrance to the waterfall Barney was aiming for before toppling back down and into the brown goop of a lake below.

Barney smiled. Well, it was kind of a plan. At least he had something he could try and wouldn't just spend the rest of his life sat in a cave shouting 'echo'. He took a few breaths, and, with as little hesitation as he could muster, hopped on his good leg into the air, landing on the fleshy trampoline.

It inflated, firing Barney into the air. He whooped as the air rushed past his face and through his damp hair. He stopped just short of hitting the ceiling, and then gravity took hold.

"Whoa, whoa…"

The security guard manoeuvred himself around in the air as he fell before colliding with the ledge where the tunnel entrance lay. Brown crap-water poured into his mouth and nose, and Barney tried to hold back the vomit urge until he had clambered up. Once he done so, he opened his mouth and let loose. Afterwards, he felt a little bit better for having expelled the foul tasting swill from his body.

Hazel eyes studied the tunnel ahead. Crystals lit the entire length, and it seemed to stay the same size all the way. Barney would barely have to hunch to get down it. He kept a steadying hand against the wall as he limped down the tunnel, the loud noise of the flowing water drowning out his pained grunts.

The blood loss was making him dizzy as he rounded yet another corner a few minutes later. He stopped when he saw light filtering in above his head. Above him was another duct cover, and Barney effortlessly snapped it into pieces. It took considerably more effort to heave himself out. He was in another cave, this one with a fairly big exit out into the open air. Barney resisted the urge to check his leg. Chances were he probably wouldn't be keeping it if he ever got back.

Barney hobbled out of the cave, feeling like he would collapse at any minute. Which just made what lay before him all the more lovely. Green-grey nothingness lay below him. If there *had* been a floor, Barney could have called the area a quarry from the way the cliff-face curved around, starting from the cave that he stood in and extending around to the left in a semicircle. On the opposite side of the endless chasm was a small island which had no obvious way out on it. But at this point, Barney didn't really care what happened. Platforms floated effortlessly between him and the island like some perverse video game God had placed him in.

The platforms were fairly close to one another, and Barney was able to limp from one to the other without too many problems.

The last platform was just a large hoop, far bigger than the grey platforms on which he had been hopping to and fro. Two tall thin pillars stood on the far end nearest the island. Barney limped around

to the pillars, suddenly aware of how thin the surface of the hoop was, especially when you were limping.

As he stood beside the pillars, resting against them gratefully, he saw that the island was too far away for him to jump, even if he had been in his prime. He sighed and was ready to sit down. That was that, then. Nowhere to go.

A loud noise assaulted his ears before he had much of a chance to do anything. Barney looked up and saw what looked like a huge stingray fish flying through the air, making a noise like a fighter jet. It came to a halt above the hoop, and simply hovered there for a few silent, painful seconds. Suddenly, bolts of yellow and white electricity lanced out of the bottom, striking the hoop in random places and one of the pillars at its' base.

The parts of the hoop touched by the electricity exploded after only a few seconds contact. Instinctively, Barney wrestled his revolver out of its holster. After looking between the creature and his tiny weapon a few times, Barney put it back. The base of the pillar exploded, and Barney hopped away in shock. The pillar toppled forward, and the very tip hit the island.

Barney smiled in sheer amazement. A bridge. That flying bastard had just given him a bridge. There probably wasn't a way off the island, but what the hell. He would still be the winner of this tiny little battle because the alien was a stupid moron. With an energy he didn't realise he still had, Barney hobbled excitedly over to the fallen pillar and started to crawl across it.

Seemingly taking no notice of his activities, the stingray jet was content to just continue blowing up the hoop.

In a dozen or so seconds, Barney was on the island. At a lack of what to do, Barney hobbled around a rock that would just about hide him out of sight if he crouched behind it. When he got there, the realised that the ground beneath him felt funny. Looking down, he found more of the onion ring air duct cover material.

He grinned again. This day was the oddest mix of dumb luck and incredibly bad coincidences he had ever come across. With a kick of his good leg, the cover crumbled, and Barney lowered himself down into the hole. There was a drop into the cave beneath. His arms were shaking. He was out of breath. With little more than a startled gasp, Barney's arms gave way and he fell, landing on his right leg and toppling over into a heap on the floor.

His jaw clenched from the pain, and Barney tried to take in his surroundings. His vision was blurry. He put it down to blood loss. The same yellow glow surrounded him, and he took it he was in yet another cave. Damn, this place was repetitive.

He heard movement ahead of him and tried to get himself to his feet. Every movement was an effort. His vision didn't clear as whatever it was came closer, but he recognised the outline. It was one of those red-eyed green-electricity shooting things. He reached for his gun, but it was jammed pretty tightly in the holster. The creature got closer, only a foot away from him now. Barney managed to wrestle the gun free and swung it around to face the alien. He tried to squeeze the trigger, but he couldn't find the energy. He kept on trying, squeezing for all he was worth.

A gentle two fingered hand rested on the weapon, bringing it down an away from its intended target. The creature moved around him. Barney felt its spindly hands hook under his armpits and pull him away. The sweet velvety blackness of unconsciousness gradually consumed him.

There was a choir singing somewhere. An all male choir from the sounds of it. Barney wasn't really a fan of choirs. Give him some Rolling Stones any day.

Wait… wasn't he on an alien world? Why would there be male choirs here? His eyes burst open and he sat up. He was wet. In fact, more than wet, he was drenched. Completely and totally drenched to the bone. But that wasn't really what was occupying Barney's attention.

That would have been the alien sitting directly opposite him, knelt like a samurai before him. It was watching him intently, its two eyes, one on top of the other, focused on him.

"Holy Christ!"

Barney scrambled back out of the pool of water he was sat, reaching fruitlessly for his weapon. He saw that it had been placed on the other side of the cave they were in, far behind the creature.

Said creature had since risen to its feet. It put its hands up defensively. Then it spoke, its almost completely hidden mouth making the head move almost imperceptibly.

"Gar jung. Gar jung."

A frown wormed its way onto Barney's face, and he gave a moment's pause. "What?"

"Gar jung," it replied soothingly. Its low growl of a voice definitely sounded masculine. Not only that, but it almost sounded like he was trying to calm Barney.

"Uh… you can speak?"

It just blinked and tilted its head.

"But not English. Okay. So you're not gonna hurt me," he asked, mentally slapping himself for asking the alien another question. He pointed a nervous finger towards the mouth of the tunnel behind the creature. "Uh… I'm just gonna… yeah…"

Barney got to his feet, and then froze. His leg. He looked down and saw dried blood around the hole in his pants and the torn bandage he had improvised from his shirt. But… no wound. Nothing. It was completely gone. In a flurry of frenzied motion, Barney checked all the other cuts, grazes and bruises he had acquired since the whole mess started. The bump on his head from the elevator crash. The

bruises on his elbows from hitting that soldier in the face. The cuts on his hands from grasping at the tunnel walls underwater. Everything was gone.

He looked at the alien in amazement, who had a look on his face that bordered on pleased.

"You… did this?" Barney breathed.

Although it probably didn't understand the exact words, it got the meaning, and nodded to the pool of water Barney had been bathing in unconsciously for the last God knows how many minutes or hours. The male choir noise was coming from the bright, glowing water. It looked like a Jacuzzi in the ground.

"Wow. It even got rid of my stiff neck." He smiled at the alien. "Thanks."

Although its mouth was below its' face and pointed downwards, Barney was certain it smiled back. The alien got to his feet and went over to Barney's gun. As though picking up a sacred object, it lifted it with two hands and delivered it to him, offering it like a sword to a legendary warrior. Barney took it and put it in the holster, wondering whether he should bow and saw something in Japanese or something.

The alien got to his feet and walked to the opening of the cave. When Barney hesitated to follow, it looked back at him and waved him over. Feeling a little bit anxious, Barney walked over and stood next to him, wondering what kind of place the alien called home.

He gaped so wide, his mouth almost hit the floor. There it was. The machine that Rosenberg had sent him to power up. And this alien thing had brought him here! It was in the middle of a smallish quarry area, the cave opening he stood in about two stories above ground level, but very reachable thanks to the large rocks that acted like steps to and from it. Barney looked over at the alien.

"Uh… thank you."

Again it just smiled, as though it understood his meaning if not his exact words. Barney clambered down the rocks, and noted with some small sense of pride that the alien was following him. Obviously he made quite an impression, although he was hard pressed to guess how. He hopped skipped the last few steps and landed enthusiastically on the ground. Damn, it was nice to be able to jump again.

Enthused, Barney excitedly strode over to the machine. It was a collection of the largest yellow crystals standing on a small circular metal platform that he had ever seen, all pointing upwards. A C shaped protrusion hung back away from the crystals, attached at the bottom to the platform. Cables led from the platform to a shiny metal box about the size of a treasure chest. Barney walked over to it and studied it. A layer of safety glass covered the controls beneath, which looked remarkably simple for a device which performed tasks that Barney held no doubt were incredibly complicated.

There were two dials a few inches apart, with two black screens above them. On the screens was a green circle divided into quarters, reminding Barney of the radar screens he had seen in so many movies. One the left green circle, a cone of red light covered the upper left. On the right circle, a similar cone covered the lower right. Barney sighed. He still wasn't sure what to do.

A grunt from his erstwhile companion attracted his attention.

"Yeah?"

A two fingered hand rose, and the creature pointed over to Barney's left. There, a small portable generator about the size of a small fridge sat idly, waiting for someone to push the magic button. Feeling excited again, Barney bounded over and found the rather large on switch. It thrummed to life, and Barney's heart began to beat faster. This was really happening. He was going to switch this baby back on, get back to Earth and escape this hell. The C shaped protrusion

moved forward with a mechanical hiss, covering the top of the tower of crystals. His alien friend studied the machine from a distance with a healthy mix of caution and awe.

He went back over to the control panel, where the layer of safety glass had lifted with a high pitched beep. After a quick study of the control panel again, he smiled. Two yellow arrows had appeared on the screens hanging idly at the bottom of their respective circles. Using the dials, Barney guided the arrows to the cones until they were at the base. The arrows each beeped affirmatively as they reached their targets. Two thin spires on either side of the crystal structure started flashing red at the tips.

Barney took that as a good sign and smiled at his friend. But his attention was elsewhere. He was staring off into the sky. Barney followed his gaze, and his eyes widened when he noticed something coming towards them. It was coming slowly, but it was coming.

The alien looked at him and pointed to the cave on ground level on the other side of the small quarry.

"Kar tak! Kar tak!"

Barney looked from the alien to the cave and back again. "What? Why?"

His friend pointed upwards, and looked like he was about to speak again when a screeching noise interrupted him. It was coming from the creature approaching them from above. A high pitched screech that hurt Barney's ears from this distance. He looked up at the creature. It had a head that severely outsized its' body, which was barely as thin as a twig. It had a huge brain. That was all Barney could think of for the way its' head was so huge and the body so tiny.

Incredibly thin and spindly arms thrust outwards to the creatures' sides. Slowly, it brought them together, putting its' twig-like hands into a praying position. A ball of yellow energy shot out and hit the

ground beneath Barney and his alien friend, sending a cloud and chunks of ground into the air.

His friend again pointed to the cave, repeating his warning. Barney tended to agree, but had a variation on the plan. He grabbed the alien by his arm and pulled him along with him as he ran to the cave, his friend all the while protesting. As they reached the cave, explosions of energy following them all the way, the alien slipped from his grasp. Barney turned and watched as the alien backed up out of the mouth of the cavern. With a look of sadness, it rubbed its' hands together, summoning the green electricity Barney knew was coming. He rushed forward.

"Don't-!"

It fired at the ceiling, caving it in and blocking off the entrance. Barney fell backwards to avoid the falling rocks and debris, squinting as the dust stung his eyes. The noise subsided, and Barney got to his feet. The rocks were too big for him to move. He could hear the noises of battle on the other side. Pained grunts and bodies rolling on the ground, desperately trying to avoid enemy fire.

Why had it done it? Why-?

Then Barney realised. It was buying him time to get back home. And not just the lab, but out of Black Mesa itself. It was defending the portal equipment so he could get home.

And just like that, the alien invasion didn't seem so simple anymore.

Barney turned and ran down the cave. It had caved in at the other end as well, although whether that was because of his alien friend or something else, Barney didn't know. He could see another level above him though, and the collapsed rock provided a handy means of reaching it. He climbed up numbly, his emotions drained from watching a new friend kill himself in such a way.

Feeling ever so slightly paranoid, Barney pulled the revolver from its holster and checked how he was doing ammunition wise. He had a full tank, so to speak. With a flick of his wrist, the barrel slid back into place, and he continued onwards. As he went along, the cavern twisted and turned every which way, reminding him of his supposedly aimless wanderings in Black Mesa. The occasional headcrab really helped to sell the nostalgia as well.

Eventually he came to the end of the tunnel, but a curiously placed hole led down a drop into another cave below. Opting to keep his good health for as long as he could, Barney lowered himself down to the ground.

"Calhoun, if you can hear me, hurry up! The battery's almost out of charge!"

That was Dr Rosenberg. How the hell could he hear Rosenberg? Barney turned and realised he was in the first cave he had wandered into, the one attached to the bridge. And there was the golden portal, hanging just off to the right of the cave entrance in mid air, which would, of course, mean a flying leap of epic proportions from Barney.

Not to mention the giant bastard of a monster standing with its' back to Barney in the cave entrance, watching the portal. That could cause some problems too. Christ, the thing was built like a bear, only three times as sturdy. It had black armour on its' torso area, head, and ankles, not that it looked like it needed any. The left hand looked like it was some kind of weapon, although Barney had no idea what that might be. So far he thought he had just been fighting wildlife. But there seemed to be something deeper going on that he couldn't begin to figure out without at *least* a dictionary. The other 'hand' was just three pointed claws in a triangular formation. Lovely.

"Calhoun! We're running out of power! You must do it now!"

He sighed. "Coming."

The huge alien tank whirled around at the noise and growled. It lifted its' left arm and fired the weapon that it had attached in lieu of a hand. Barney heard some high pitched bursting noises as three small red objects flew out at him. They buzzed like insects as they came closer.

Barney dove out of the way, turning the leap into a forward roll. He doubled over as the insect things pounded into his back. He shook his head.

"Okay… so they follow you."

How fun.

He scrabbled to his feet and sprinted straight at the monstrous thing before him. Instead of firing, it swung its' right arm back and looked about ready to swat him away like an annoying bug. As it brought the tree trunk of an arm around, Barney dove down and forward, sliding between the creature's legs and out the other side.

"Calhoun!"

Rosenberg sounded incredibly desperate. Barney got to his feet as the alien turned and he ran to the edge of the bridge, pushing himself off and towards the glowing yellow light before him. He heard the alien fire off a few more shots before he descended into the light.

Then everything went green.

For a few sweet seconds, Barney was alone. Floating in nothingness. And as long as it didn't last, nothingness was fine. Nothingness felt good compared to the crap he'd been dealing with recently.

His vision flashed green again, and suddenly, he was back in Dr Rosenberg's lab, landing with an inelegant thud on the platform below. Rosenberg, oblivious to any discomfort on Barney's part, continued his work behind the windows of the control booth he was

stood in. The noise of the teleporter began to die down as he shut off the machine whirring above Barney's head.

"Good job, Mr Calhoun. We began to worry when you didn't come back for some time, but it looks as though you were able to get the device operational."

Barney got to his feet and walked over where Rosenberg was working. Instantly, he had no idea what the good doctor was doing on the control panel, other than 'important stuff'.

"So how long until we get out of here?" Suddenly, Barney remembered something. "Uh, Doc…"

Rosenberg seemed reluctant to speak at first. "The signal we're getting *is* very strong, but I'm afraid I have some bad news."

Barnet put up a hand. "Doc."

"The power reserves were just enough to open the field for your trip to the border world-"

"Doc!"

"Yes?"

His voice was slightly pained as he spoke. "I gotta pee."

"Oh. I see. All right, follow me, I'll take you to the bathroom."

Rosenberg took him out of the lab and into the hallway outside, where two doors on the opposite side had the male and female symbols. With barely nod, Barney dashed inside. Once he was done, he went outside to find Rosenberg and the balding Walter Bennett waiting for him outside. Bennett nodded to his crotch, and after realising what he meant, Barney sheepishly did up his fly.

"Thanks." He looked to Rosenberg. "So, Doc… what were you saying?"

"Um… yes. I have some bad news."

Barney sighed. "Okay, what do I have to do?"

"Well, you see, the power reserves were just enough to open the field for your trip to the border world. If we plan on leaving the teleporter open long enough to calculate a safe exit point, and allow enough time for everyone to go through, someone will have to go to the lower level and retrieve another power cell. A few of our colleagues went down awhile ago, but," he looked to Bennett, concerned. "We haven't heard from them since. I can only fear for the worst."

He sighed, looking very desperate. "I hate to keep putting you in this position, but surely you must realise that if someone doesn't go down there then none of us will get out of here alive. Besides, you're the best equipped to deal with any dangers that may be waiting."

Barney nodded in reply, knowing the good scientist was right.

"On the bright side," Rosenberg added, his voice going up an octave in a forced attempt at being happy, "Bennett was looking through one of the old storage lockers and found a helmet!"

As though unveiling a prize-winning sculpture, Bennett brought his hands from behind his back and awarded the helmet to him.

"Oh," he said blankly, taking the helmet. "Good."

They didn't move, apparently expecting something more.

"Uh… thank you."

Rosenberg, now satisfied, smiled and nodded. "Here, I'll lead you to the access elevator that leads to the power generator. Follow me." He took him across the room and opened some very secure looking doors, revealing an elevator that looked like it was designed for descending into mineshafts. "Ah, here we are. Down this elevator is

the old power generators that we used to service this lab. You should find what we're looking for down there. Once you've found a new power cell, make sure it's fully charged and then send it up the freight lift. Good luck."

Trying to hide his sigh, Barney nodded and walked into the open elevator. With an awkward smile and a nod, Dr Rosenberg turned and walked back into the hall, discussing something or other with Bennett as he did so. Barney pressed the big green button on the control panel sprouting from the ground, and the elevator jerked to life, almost making him fall over.

As the elevator trundled down the red light shaft, Barney concentrated on trying to get his new helmet on instead of focusing on the sizeable gap between the wall and the elevator in front of him. The way the elevator swung about didn't particularly help, either. The helmet fit rather snugly, actually, which was odd for him because he usually had to order the bigger sizes for his larger than average head. The elevator came to a stop in front of metal doors that mirrored the ones upstairs.

He opened them and suddenly found out what happened to the colleagues Rosenberg had sent down. A security guard lay face down on the ground before him, alongside a scientist lying on his back. One of those bull… squid things, with the two legs and mouths with red tentacles, was feasting on the scientist's innards. It had its back to him. Barney pulled out his revolver and pointed it straight at the creature. He cocked the hammer back, which made it turn in alarm. Upon spotting Barney, it let out a loud roar and made to charge him.

Barney had to unload three bullets into it before it gave up and died. Once it was indeed confirmedly dead, Barney blew out a long breath and slipped the revolver away, aware in the back of his mind that he only had a few bullets left. He walked to the right from the elevator entrance (he didn't know why, exactly) and came to two gaps in the wall. One was a thick chain linked fence, but was obviously made of a metal much stronger. The next gap led to a little corridor with a

door at the end. The light above it flickered on and off, indicating a power failure of some sort. So that would mean that Barney would have to turn on one power generator in order to charge up a battery down here and send it up there to turn on the power generator up there.

Barney hated everything at that moment. Every single thing in the known universe, he just hated. Then it passed, and he resolved to move on with a sigh. The noise of something teleporting in sounded from behind the door, and Barney rushed to the fence to see into the room.

"What is it?"

It sounded like one of those electricity aliens. Barney frowned. He had no idea what he would do if he came across one of them. Before, he just saw an ugly-ass alien. Now all he could see was a person who had saved his life *twice* .

"Don't worry, sir, I got it!"

Gunshots rang out, and the creature died before it could even fire. Barney had never felt simultaneous relief and sadness before. Relief that these fellow humans were alive, sadness because something potentially friendly was dead.

"But… these creatures… they're everywhere! What are we going to do?!"

"Calm down. If we don't get this power cell charged, none of us are gonna-"

Another teleportation noise rang out, and this time, the electrical discharge was almost immediate, hitting the security guard and impaling him to the wall. The scientist with him screamed and ran. Barney tried to knock the fence over, but it didn't even move when he shook it. When he tried the door, as expected, it didn't budge, only making a negative beeping noise. Angrily, he slammed his

palms against the door, making it clang loudly. Feeling better in himself but annoyed because now his palms hurt, Barney wandered out of the tiny corridor and to where the large elevator was. He'd have to go to the power generator, wherever that was, and if any of the doors would even open for him.

A noise from his left attracted his attention. He walked out into the hallway and looked in that direction. There was a door at the far end, the sign above it reading 'COOLANT EXCHANGE ACCESS'. Sparks flew from the lower left hand corner, and Barney knew instantly what it was; a blowtorch. Which would mean soldiers would come pouring through it any second. And here he was with… Barney counted his bullets and groaned.

Three bullets!

His aim wasn't *that* good. And even if it was, what if there was four of them? God, was he screwed. With a crick of his neck, he decided to go out fighting anyway. Hopefully he'd manage to take them with him so Rosenberg could send someone else down who wouldn't get killed. That was, of course, assuming that these were the only soldiers in the whole complex.

The blow torch was nearly at the bottom of the right hand corner, and, after taking a run up, Barney charged at the door, timing it so that the blowtorch reached the bottom just as he collided with it. The door creaked back surprisingly fast, crushing some hapless soldier behind it. Three more soldiers looked on in surprise and anger.

Four soldiers! I called it!

The soldiers cocked their weapons.

Well done, Barney. Now you can die.

The three soldiers together formed a triangle in front of him. Barney swiped his legs through those of the soldier on his right, knocking him onto his back. The security guard launched up towards the one

in front of him, leading with his head and smashing his helmet into the soldier's nose. He collapsed forward with the soldier, landing in a heap with him while the left-hand soldier fired at where he once was. With another vicious head butt of his helmet, the Barney managed to knock his playmate out and stole his M4 from him rolling away from the body. Firing at the stood soldier blindly. He managed to catch him in the shoulder before slicing through the soldier's head and felling him.

By this point, the soldier he had tripped up was now on his feet again, his face such a shade of red it matched the beret he wore. Before he could even get his weapon up, Barney had fired a few rounds into his ankle, knocking him over again. Barney finished the job first on the cursing beret wearing soldier, then on the unconscious one who he had been head butting not a few seconds before.

Barney's legs suddenly turned to jelly, and he collapsed into a sitting position on the floor. He blew out a shaky breath. He had gone in with nothing and killed four highly trained soldiers.

Because he was Barney Calhoun. Security Guard.

Damn, survival felt good sometimes. He heaved himself to his feet and went for an explore. As he walked, he tentatively (and curiously) tapped on the surface of his helmet. No cracks. He was impressed. They really built these things to last.

Just off to the right of the little corridor he had been fighting in was an old office area, age-old papers strewn about the floors with thin broken glass in the windows that were supposed to give some semblance of privacy to the workers there. A few of them even had desks inside, although they had certainly seen better days. Barney smiled. This place sure had been done on the cheap. The walls looked incredibly thin, like Barney could run through them if he tried.

He had to admit, it sounded like fun, but it would have to be one of those things he never got around to trying.

Priorities, Barney, priorities.

In a room near the offices, Barney found a display that was a measuring device of some kind, starting red on the left before gradually fading through orange, to yellow, and finally green on the right. Above it in big black letters read the words 'AUX POWER'. Barney nodded in silent understanding and moved on.

A few minutes of wandering through dark, badly lit corridors later, Barney came to a wide metal walkway that led into a huge expansive area. On his left was something that had all the makings of the business side of a dam, water pouring through large holes all along the top. The walkway led to a wide entrance on the opposite side of the area. Diagonally above him on the left were two more entrances on opposite sides. Judging by the grooves in the wall leading from where the walkway was now and up to the two entrances, Barney guessed there was some way to mechanically move the walkway up and down between the two. And knowing his luck, he would need to find it himself.

With a sigh, he continued on, eventually coming to a small room with a red ladder than led up. There were some military crates in the room, and when he heard military radio chatter coming from the room above, Barney scooped up a grenade from an open crate. He climbed up the ladder as quietly as he could. The next floor didn't cover the small room, instead having a guardrail that would prevent anyone on the upper floor from falling down, and also to watch anyone or anything in said small room.

Hey, Barney didn't design the damn place.

On the opposite side of the room, two soldiers stood in front of a radio, struggling to get it to work. Barney pulled the pin on the grenade and tossed it. It landed behind them on the metal floor far louder than Barney had hoped, and the two soldiers turned around. Barney leapt down off the ladder, and the grenade exploded.

One badly burnt body flew over the guardrail and down in front of Barney, crackling as the flames flickered from the clothes on his body. Barney climbed up the ladder one handed, searching with his M4 for the second soldier, who undoubtedly had the bright idea to run away from the grenade. Barney stepped off the ladder and discovered the soldier obviously *hadn't*, because his boot was now digging into his scorched arm.

He blew for a long time as he walked away, half because he had avoided another huge fire fight, but also because the smell of the dead bodies made him more than slightly nauseous, and if there one thing he wasn't going to do over the course of this whole crap fest of an incident, it was throw up.

Because only sissies throw up.

Barney walked on down the only corridor available to him, not feeling at all ready for anything that awaited him.

(A/N: Yup, I changed the name back again. The other story called 'The Black Mesa Incident' seems to have fallen by the wayside, but even if it comes back, I figured people know the difference by now. Hell, a third novelisation has come up while I've been away (although I wouldn't call mine a novelisation as such; it's way too unprofessional for that), which I look forward to reading and reviewing as soon as the opportunity presents itself - apologies to Spymaster E (if you're reading this), I'll get to it as soon as I can!

But yeah, anyway, back on topic:

Gasp! Another update! And *so soon!* I've been neglecting my *Half-Life* readership lately, and for that I apologise. But I'm now firmly back on the saddle, and updates will be far more regular (I can hear Hhgbh growling in frustration now at the extra workload ;)). Whether it's something in the water or just anticipation for Episode 2, something has once again sparked my interest in these three guys' separate struggles for survival.

Speaking of which… Shephard is coming. And he will kick ass.

And finally, to wrap up: Review please!

Next Chapter: Power Up)

Power Up

Disclaimer: I don't own *Half-Life.*

(A/N: To hhgbh I send many thanks for beta-ing)

The Black Mesa Incident

Chapter Thirteen: Power Up

Gordon had a hard time remembering the last time his back hurt this much. It could've been that time when he and Dr Kleiner tried to move an equipment crate from one side of the lab to the other. Or maybe it was when Barney had leapt on his back for fear of the spider that had dangled down from the roof behind him. Those both left pretty painful marks on his memory.

But, he had to admit, this one took the cake. Falling through a rusty pipe usually used for sewage, through ceiling tiles and down onto a wooden table which then collapsed beneath his weight? Yes. That was fairly painful when compared to the other incidents.

"Oh… ow."

The voice made his eyes flickered open, and Gordon quickly realised that his glasses had come off in the fall. Everything blurred before him, and he tried to blink the blurriness away. Shockingly, it didn't work, so he went about trying to find his spectacles, hoping that Philips would get the hint and help him out eventually.

"You… okay?"

The security guard's voice sounded very groggy. Gordon couldn't blame him, really. He was wearing little to no protection against such big falls. At least, no protection compared to Gordon's HEV suit. Already he could feel the suit tending to his injuries, his medium

health stats remaining the same but still stable. He sighed. Philips still hadn't got the message.

"I'm fine. But, um…"

Philips spent a few seconds just staring at him, before finally catching on. "Oh! Your glasses. Sorry, I'll just get them."

"You can see them?"

"Yep. Right over here."

A blurry mass passed him by, knelt just a few feet in front of Gordon, scooping up a smaller black object from the ground. Philips handed them over, and suddenly the world became clear again. Gordon immediately looked up. The pipe hadn't collapsed; it had broken and swung downwards, becoming a makeshift slide. That was probably why Philips didn't have two broken legs, although Gordon was sure he was probably still in considerable pain.

He hid it admirably well with a wry smile.

"Last time I go to the fun park."

Gordon's smile was far tighter, and he immediately regretted making such a potentially harsh reaction. With the damage already done, Gordon checked that Martha was still with him, as well as his handgun. All present and accounted for. Philips was doing the same, and after they were both done they gave each other an affirmative nod before looking around.

They were in a supply room. Crates surrounded them on every wall, with an open corridor beginning in the far left corner. The table they had landed on had some med kits, and Gordon handed one over to Philips, who took it gratefully and sat down, tending to his wounds. He looked up at Gordon curiously, who just shook his head politely. He could hold out until they came across a HEV charging station. A crate labelled with the red words 'Ammunition' caught his eye, and

he wandered over, Martha slipping from his shoulder a few times before he tossed her to the ground irritably.

He knelt beside the weapon and pulled his crowbar from where it was tied to the barrel. A few swings, grunts and pulls later, the crate was open, and Gordon smiled. The mother load.

With relish he didn't think he would ever have for weapons, Gordon loaded Martha as full as she could go (eight or nine, he wasn't counting), and checked and loaded his handgun. Philips was up and about by this point, and helped himself to some ammunition. Feeling safer behind their loud killing machines, Gordon and Philips proceeded on down the corridor.

As they walked further on, the rattling noise of machinegun fire echoed down off the tight walls. Gordon and Philips exchanged a look before they walked on towards the source of light and the noise. The corridor opened out into a mammoth, circular room. In the middle of the room, a rail tram lay on a turnstile, pointing towards Gordon and Philips. A rail led to a tunnel entrance on the right hand side, but the turnstile was pointing in the wrong direction for them to just hop on and let her fly.

The control room for the turnstile was on the upper left of the room, a wide open window overlooking the tram turnstile. Gordon's eyes grew wide as he saw who was inside. The man with the briefcase. That pale ghost of a man… what was he doing here? Was he stalking him?

Gordon was about to step out into the hall and get him before he vanished, but sudden loud noises distracted him. Opposite from them, two wildly firing soldiers backed out of a blackened tunnel, the only one that matched the height of the rest of the room. A quick glance back to the control room confirmed what Gordon suspected would happen; the man in the suit was gone. He decided to focus on what was going on in front of him. Philips seemed ready to fight the soldiers, but Gordon put a calming hand on his arm. The security guard gave him a questioning look that seemed to question his

sanity without his lips even moving. Gordon just nodded at the soldiers. They weren't even looking at Philips and Gordon. Their attention was on something in the tunnel.

And, judging from the rumbling of very big footsteps, whatever it was large. *Very* large.

As if in answer to Gordon's assumption, a blue alien the size of a truck cab lumbered out of the shadows, growling at the tiny soldiers that dared challenge it. Two thick set legs held up the cab-sized torso, which the head seemed to be a part of. Gordon couldn't see any eyes, but the mouth jutted out pointedly below where the eyes *would* be if this creature were like any other on Earth. Although there was something glowing red just above the mouth, where the nose would be on a dog.

"Looks like an eye just above the mouth…" Philips muttered, as though reading Gordon's thoughts.

The arms, about as thick as tree trunks, ended almost at the creature's ankles. Gordon couldn't see any hands or fingers, just claw-like appendages.

One of the soldiers tossed a grenade at the approaching creature's feet, and his companion followed suit. After a few seconds, they exploded. The creature barely moved from the blast, continuing forward towards its prey.

Philips shook his head. "Jesus…"

Gordon agreed. This wouldn't be an easy one to get around or kill. Although, really, none of them had been up to this point.

The gargantuan creature lifted its arms and pointed the claws, the undersides a much lighter colour then the rest of the scale-like skin. Two white hot jets of flame burst forth, like two enormous Bunsen burners. The soldiers were ripped apart almost instantly, the flame so hot they didn't even burn to ash.

Gordon closed his eyes at the sight and bowed his head. They wouldn't have hesitated to kill him if they had noticed him, but still… he couldn't help but feel remorse for senseless deaths. He figured that as long as he kept on doing that, this experience wouldn't turn him into a heartless monster.

Philips, however, held no such concerns. "Is it just me," he said, and Gordon looked over at him. The security guard's gaze was firmly on the alien creature, which hadn't spotted them or even made an effort to move after killing the soldiers.

"Or are we screwed?" he finished.

There wasn't much Gordon could say to that as he looked back at the monster. It was just stood on the spot, breathing heavily from the exertion of frying two little enemies. At least, Gordon assumed (hoped) it was exertion. That would mean it could be tired out, outrun. The red glowing eye had since subsided into a calm yellow, which Gordon took to mean it was resting, or at least off guard. Something caught his eye, and Gordon pointed it out to Philips.

"There," he whispered, not sure if the creature had good hearing like those tentacles had had. Hell, he wasn't sure if the thing even had *ears* . His companion followed Gordon's finger, and by the look on his face, he had seen it as well.

Just off to the left of the blackened tunnel that the monster had emerged from, there was another corridor, this one much appearing much more squat, although Gordon was sure it was just comparatively so. It would definitely accommodate humans with a few feet to spare over their heads.

Unfortunately the monster was stood directly in front of it, gazing off into the wall serenely. Philips seemed to sum it up well enough.

"Crap."

Gordon slung Martha over his shoulder and knelt on one knee, studying the creature.

"Bullets won't work…" he said to himself quietly, going through the options in his head. He usually did this when faced with a mathematical problem or something a little more intellectual. But hopefully it would work for this situation as well.

Philips, not familiar with Gordon's method, responded as though he had just made the most stupid observation in the world. "Damn right, they won't. Their bullets were bouncing off it like ping pong balls."

And right now he was thinking 'I thought scientists were supposed to be smart', but Gordon was only peripherally aware of Philips' opinion of him right now.

The control room was probably reachable through the corridor behind the creature. If they could get there and turn the tram in the right direction, they *might* outrun it. Gordon shook his head, dismissing the idea. That thing would probably roast them before they got anywhere near it. What was down the big, bad, shadowy corridor? And why were the military in there with it in the first place? He put that thought aside for later. Exploring was definitely a secondary priority after the all time favourite number one, survival.

"I'll distract it," he resolved, more to himself than Philips.

"You'll what?" That 'stupid scientist' tone was even more evident now. Although now it seemed more like 'crazy scientist'.

"I'll distract it while you run to the corridor," Gordon clarified, doing his best to make his tone as patronising as possible.

"Are you nuts? That thing'll fry you!" His voice was a harsh whisper, and he continually checked that the creature hadn't got wind of their presence in the room with it.

"The suit should protect me," he replied, getting to his feet. "To some degree, anyway. Once you're safely inside, I'll follow you."

"You're nuts."

"You've already said that."

"Well it's the truth, you moron! That suit won't protect you against heat like that."

Gordon shrugged and took Martha off his shoulder. He pumped the weapon. "I guess we'll find out."

And without leaving any more time for arguments, Gordon rocketed out into the room, firing in the monster's general direction. Some of the spray hit it, and it twitched. Quickly, it looked around the room for its mystery attacker, before finally settling its gaze on Gordon. The peaceful yellow hue of the eye became a far more threatening red as it stomped over to him. Suddenly Gordon felt as stupid as Philips thought he was.

Said security guard had wasted no time upon Gordon's hopefully-not-kamikaze run, and Gordon saw a blue blur dash into the corridor through the monster's legs.

So now it was time for the easy part.

Gordon was calculating what the odds were of him leaping through the creature's legs unharmed when the sound of gunfire rang out across the room. But this wasn't from Philips. The monster turned to the source, the accompanying roar sounding almost indignant. A security guard leant against the ledge of the observation window in the control room, pointing his standard handgun at the monster. He fired off a few more shots, shouting wild random noises at it. With a jerk of his head, he indicated for Gordon to run.

Had that security guard seen the briefcase man? Was he in league with him somehow? A growl from the monster shook him from his

musings and Gordon sprinted to the corridor where Philips awaited.

"You okay?"

Breathless, Gordon just nodded. He could hear the monster unleashing hell on the control room. Philips understood Gordon's concern and indicated to the corridor behind them. There were two directions they could take, one going off to the right, the other straight ahead. A sign on the corridor going right read 'Generator Room', while another on the straight corridor read 'Control Room'.

"That's where he is," Gordon said before leading the way, Martha held firmly in hand. They followed the corridor up a brief flight of stairs, and the corridor turned left. Barely taking in his surroundings, Gordon was ready to rush ahead when Philips spoke up.

"Whoa…" He put a cautioning hand on Gordon's shoulder, and with the other, gun clasped firmly in hand, he pointed out the open pipe jutting out of the ground, an almost blue-hot flame steadily crackling away. With a grateful nod to his companion, Gordon stepped over it and continued around the corner.

Two aliens of the electricity throwing variety awaited him there, turning around as he entered. They looked as alarmed as he did, but he recovered faster.

One blast from Martha ripped into the alien on the right, killing it instantly. The other was ready to fire before Gordon had a chance to pump the gun again, but a quick bullet from Philips handgun went straight through its eye, and it collapsed to the ground. Gordon looked over at him.

"Okay?"

Philips threw up on the ground, and Gordon felt awkward. He tossed Martha around his shoulder by the strap and put a sympathetic hand on the security guard's back.

"Sorry," he coughed, wiping away any excess on his chin with his sleeve. "I just… I've never done this before."

He nodded, understanding completely. After all, that had been him vomiting everywhere at almost any opportunity just a few short hours ago. God, was it only hours?

"Anyway, let's uh… get going," Philips said, walking on with what he obviously hoped were confident strides. The way his legs shook slightly as he stepped over the dead bodies didn't really bolster the image he was trying to project.

In front of them was a walkway that hugged the wall on the right and continued on to the wall in front of them, where the doors to the control room stood on the far left of the room. There were planks of wood and crates blocking it up. Gordon felt suddenly excited and anxious. That would mean the briefcase man was still in there. The answer to everything that had happened today was in that room, waiting for him. Gordon knew that man would be able to give him the answers. Somehow, he just *knew.* The walkway extended a little further outwards from where the doors were, attached to the wall on the left. It didn't extend all the way to them, however, instead ending halfway with a red ladder extending downwards to the floor below.

Gordon and Philips walked across the walkway - Gordon noted with approval that the walkway had a handrail - and made quick work of the wooden planks blocking their way. They cautiously pushed the doors open. Gordon immediately looked around the room. No sign of him. He frowned. How the hell did he get out of there? In front of them, leant back against the wall, was the security guard that had pulled Gordon's fat out of the fire earlier. Blood was pooling beneath him, coming from beneath his Kevlar vest.

"Hi," he managed.

Philips looked white as a sheet, but Gordon knew he was the one who would probably know more about tending to injuries than himself. The scientist knelt beside him.

"Thank you."

He waved the gratitude away. "I'm just glad to see some human, non-military faces."

Gordon knew the feeling. "Does the tram work?"

The guard shook his head. "If you can turn the power on, it'll take you all the way to the surface."

"Why haven't you done it?" Philips asked, sounding more desperate than accusatory.

Both Gordon and the injured guard shot him an irritated look. After another glance at the blood pooling beneath the guard, Philips bowed his head in apology.

"It's a long way down to the generator room," the guard finished, looking at Gordon, "and there are… *things…* in the way."

Things. Lovely.

He put a hand on the guard's shoulder. "I'll go down and turn it on."

A nod was the only reply he got.

"Is there a med kit anywhere?"

"Nah," he gasped.

Gordon nodded, stood and went to the doorway, gently guiding Philips there by the arm. "You take care of him. I'll do the generator."

He looked uncomfortable with this notion. "But… what about the… things? Won't you need help?"

"He needs help more."

"Yeah, but…"

"Philips. Please."

He stared into Gordon's eyes before finally taking a deep breath and nodding. The security guard numbly wandered over to his injured fellow employee and sat down beside him against the wall.

"I'm Philips," he said simply, extending a hand.

"Robertson. Nice to…" he grunted in pain, "meet you."

Satisfied that Philips would be able to at least keep Robertson awake, Gordon walked across the walkway and back to the intersection where he had seen the sign for the generator room. A few twists and turns later and Gordon was about to walk down a flight of stairs that would take him there.

A loud howl echoed through the corridor and vibrated the ground, making Gordon stumble. The roof caved in on the stairs in front of Gordon, blocking them completely. After waiting for the dust to settle, Gordon realised that he wasn't getting to the generator room *that* way. He went back to the control room, where Philips and Robertson looked at him with surprise.

"That was fast," Robertson said.

"Is there another way to the generator room besides the stairs?"

The security guard nodded to the ladder that was attached to the walkway outside. Gordon looked at it for a few moments.

"Oh. Okay."

He climbed down the ladder attached to the walkway and to the floor below, where the corridor arched around to the right. Martha cocked and ready for action, Gordon followed it around. It was a fairly uneventful journey, at least compared to the ones Gordon had been going on recently.

A few of those headcrab things here and there, an electricity shooting alien in a room full of explosive chemicals (they really weren't smart, some of these aliens), and that was about it. He didn't even have to use Martha. The headcrabs had been easily dispensed with a few swings of the crowbar (sometimes in mid-air, baseball style - Gordon was proud of those), and the electricity alien… well, random sparks, explosive chemicals… it was almost as if someone was giving Gordon a break.

And then he came to some red safety doors. On the wall beside it was a serial number imprinted in large black letters, although Gordon had no clue what it could mean. A red wheel was lodged in the wall beneath it, and, with that feeling of dread that was becoming more and more commonplace, Gordon turned it. It took more effort than he thought to open the door, and once it was open, the grinding noise didn't stop, as though something was still working away in the walls.

Gordon sighed and rubbed his eyes beneath his glasses. There it was. The lovely familiar glow of toxic material. And Oh! Look! It was another cylindrical chamber. Gordon stepped inside. This chamber was far tighter than the one the tentacle monsters had been in. He was stood on a walkway that ran the circumference of the chamber, and Gordon could see two more levels above him, and none below. Just toxic waste. A ladder led up to the second floor, and from there another led to the third.

He made his way to the second floor, and stepped into the room beside the top of the ladder. He back-pedalled and ripped Martha from his shoulder when he saw the soldier lying on the ground, face down. It was a tiny room, barely big enough to fit three people in. The wall on the right was a control panel. There was a hole in the wall behind the soldier, just big enough for someone to crawl through if they were so inclined. The soldier's foot was inside said crawlspace.

After a quick look around the area, Gordon kicked the soldiers' head experimentally. Nothing. He was dead. He felt relieved, and then guilty at his relief that another human being was dead. And just like

that, the emotions disappeared. Was this how military people dealt with it? They started to deal with these emotions quicker to the point where they barely felt them?

His philosophical musings were cut short when he noticed the soldier was moving unnaturally. He was sliding backwards towards the hole. It was only then that Gordon heard the strange grunting and growling noises of one of the many aliens Gordon had come across over the course of the day. Not too keen on finding out which one, Gordon proceeded up the ladder to the top floor.

This room was far bigger, and seemed to open up into a storage room. Tall and squat wooden crates were all over the place. It was a dull brown which provided a welcome break from the luminescent glow of the toxic waste. To the right was a corridor the turned to the right again a few feet down. He stepped inside the room, Martha just slung from his shoulder when he heard the whine of a turret on his left. Panicking, he just fired blindly, taking out one of the turrets' legs and causing it to topple. It fired wildly in every direction and Gordon dove behind some storage crates to avoid the bullets. After a few seconds, the turret calmed down and deactivated. Gordon blew out a breath and heaved himself up from behind the crate.

"What the hell was that?"

Gordon ducked back down again so quickly he almost fell over. Two soldiers burst into the room, rifles at the ready. One wore a helmet and a gasmask, while the other wore a balaclava.

"Who the fuck did that?"

Rather than risk being seen, Gordon ducked his head down as well.

"Took out the leg." That voice sounded like it was beside the turret.

"I'll check downstairs."

He heard footsteps that changed pitch when they left the concrete floor of the room and started clomping along the metal walkway. Gordon could hear him descending down the stairs. Slowly, Gordon inched his head up. The soldier was gone. He peeked around his hiding place even more cautiously. Gasmask was stood at a table beside the collapsed turret, fiddling with what Gordon assumed was a radio.

Trying to be both fast and stealthy - which wasn't very easy for someone with his reputation of clumsiness - Gordon crept out of his hiding place and went around the corner, pointing Martha at the soldier as he backed up around the corner. Once there, he took a breath, but didn't allow himself to stop, or to turn around. He continued backing up down the corridor until the wall on his left suddenly disappeared and opened up into a huge hallway.

Two ramps on either side led down to the hallway, with a gap in-between them. Two platforms on the right and left jutted out of the walls just in front of where the ramps ended. There was just enough room on either for one person to stand on them, and a red guardrail ran along the outside of the platform. Two open doorways behind the platforms led into hidden corridors that Gordon felt that he would no doubt be exploring soon enough.

At the far end of the room was a military barricade, a low level wall of sandbags set up in a line. Crates full of explosives were stacked up behind the 'wall'. A soldier's shaved head could be seen resting against the sandbags, his back to Gordon. As if sensing Gordon's notice of him, he idly turned his head, his eyes widening as they came into contact with the interloper.

He sprang to his feet and took aim with his rifle, talking into his radio.

"Squad! We got Freeman!"

He fired, hitting Gordon in the shoulder and knocking him over. Gordon rolled on the ground until he was facing his attacker again. He took aim and fired Martha at the crates behind the soldier. They

exploded instantly, launching the soldier twenty feet into the air before he came crashing down with a dull thud and a crunch.

Gordon rubbed his shoulder where the bullet had hit. He needed to recharge the suit; Robertson's injuries had distracted him from taking care of himself. This place seemed like the kind that would require the staff to wear HEV suits occasionally, so Gordon hoped he would come across one soon enough. Usually that bullet wouldn't have knocked him over. With a shake of his head he continued on down the ramp on his right, fully aware of the fact that the soldier had called into his fellows that he was here.

The gap between ramps was in fact a ramp on the ground level that went in the other direction, leading to a small cubby-hole of a room beneath the corridor that Gordon has just been backing down. Inside he found a HEV recharge station on the wall and smiled. Within a minute the suit was almost at 100 and distributing that power to his injuries as was necessary, as well as reinforcing the protective field around his body. He also saw a crate with some grenades inside on the other end of the room, and scooped up two.

Gordon continued on, stepping around the wall of sandbags. A zigzag of two ramps and a flat third at the top led to a doorway in the middle of the wall. Gordon went up and approached the doorway. The noise of soldier's boots quickly made him backtrack, and he pulled the pin on both of the grenades. He turned into the doorway and saw soldiers converging from the corridor within from both the left and the right. Both groups seemed to freeze for half a second when they saw him brazenly step into their line of fire. Whipping his arms out to either side, he tossed the grenades into both groups and ran back out of the doorway, leaping out over the guardrail of the top ramp and aiming for the sandbags below.

The force of the explosion behind him caused him to overshoot slightly, and Gordon ended up colliding with the ground in a skid, sliding along until he almost ended up back in the little cubby-hole where he had recharged his suit. He rested his forehead on the cool concrete below him before grunting and pushing himself to his feet.

After readjusting his glasses, Gordon scooped up Martha and pumped another casing out of the side. He took a moment to listen to the hollow noise of it bouncing along the ground before he ventured forth and back up the ramps.

He peeked his head around the doorway first before entering the corridor fully and turning left. Burn marks were pasted onto the walls where the grenade had exploded. A smell wafted up his nostrils, and it took Gordon a few moments to realise what it was.

Burning flesh. In the corridor behind him, three soldiers lay on the ground, their skin a nauseating mix of inflamed red and charred black. Their uniforms were scorched, small flames licking at the air from random patches. Rather than linger on the death that he had just caused, Gordon continued on down the corridor, away from the bodies. The corridor opened up into a bigger room, which had the makings of a lab about it. A control panel rested at the far end of the room, where a hastily erected table next to it held a military radio.

Two more dead bodies lay sprawled across the middle of the room, their radios crackling with haunting static. On the right was a supply elevator, four yellow and black striped pipes leading from the ceiling and down to the floor below through holes in the corners of the elevator. A control panel with red and green buttons on it stood beside the elevator. The red was lit up. Gordon walked over to it.

Something big slammed into him, knocking him onto the elevator platform. Martha flew from his grasp, sliding along the floor and into the corridor. As Gordon turned over a soldier leapt on top of him, machete knife bearing down on Gordon's face. His face sickeningly burnt, the rage powering him making the sight before Gordon even more contorted and repulsive. He quickly put up his hands and grasped the knife-bearing wrist just as it tapped the surface of his glasses.

"Fucking scientist shit!"

Spittle sprayed from his mouth onto Gordon's face.

Looking down, Gordon spotted the red lit button of the control panel, and started kicking at the green one below it.

"You can't do this to me…"

He finally kicked the button, and the elevator descended with a sudden jerk. The soldier glanced up in confusion, and Gordon took that opportunity to drive a sharp knee into his groin. His opponent let out only a brief, loud of grunt of pain before moving enough for Gordon to push him away. The elevator reached the lower floor, and Gordon started to run.

He came to a sudden halt when he was confronted by two laser trip mines, ones at knee height, the other at chest level. A quick look around confirmed that the entire platform was surrounded by them, two on every side of the square platform. The soldier got to his feet, waving his knife around in the air as he and Gordon circled each other. The blue glow of the water below them lit up his burnt face in a haunting, ghostly way. Gordon's hand went slowly to the holster where his handgun lay.

The elevator jerked back up again, and the soldier charged at Gordon, roaring all the way. He whipped out the gun and fired, hitting the soldier direct in the chest. A cloud of white powder popped out of his vest, and the soldier just kept on going, barrelling straight into him. The elevator had reached to the upper floor again, and they collapsed into the lab area above. His opponent, on top of him once again, slammed Gordon's gun hand against the ground three times before he lost his grip, sending the weapon sliding along the ground towards Martha.

The soldier brought his knife up, intending to bring it down in one strong stabbing stroke. Gordon slammed the palm of his free left hand into the soldiers face as hard as he could, knocking him back enough for Gordon to get his right foot out from under him and give him a kick to the kneecap. There wasn't much strength behind it, but it was enough to knock him back onto the elevator and drop his

knife. Swinging his leg around, he hit the green button that would lower the elevator.

As the soldier got to his feet, he looked at Gordon in surprise as the elevator lowered to the lower floor with him on it. Getting to his feet, Gordon ripped off his handgun holster as quickly as he could and peeked over the ledge to look down on the soldier on the lower floor, which was barely ten metres down. The soldier looked up at him.

"I'll get you, you motherfuckin-"

He froze as Gordon tossed the holster down at one of the blue lasers of the trip mines. Gordon backed up from the opening and closed his eyes as he heard them explode, the soldier's scream dying out in less than a second. After a pause of a few seconds, the elevator platform came back up. The metal looked slightly scorched, but there nothing to suggest that anyone had been stood there. His breathing shaky, Gordon wiped the sweat from his forehead and around his eyes before going to pick up Martha and his handgun. Having sacrificed his holster, Gordon slung Martha over his shoulder and resolved to just hold the Glock as is.

Gordon went back to the elevator and went down below. Blood spattered along the walls, and Gordon didn't want to even think about what was in the water below. The corridor was rather cramped, a layer of water on the floor kept separate from him by a raised metal walkway that ran along the center of the corridor. It followed the corridor around a left turning corridor, and Gordon did the same.

The problem was relatively simple, especially compared to some of the other tasks Gordon had had to perform recently. A quick walk down a spiral staircase to the bottom floor - flooded up to the waist with water - revealed that the hydraulic system had been blocked up by some wooden crates, most likely getting stuck there when the room flooded. Or by the military, Gordon had no way of telling. After a few whacks with the crowbar, the boxes were disposed of and the

machine thrummed to life, the hydraulic pumps working in unison like a… well, like a well oiled machine.

The second floor held the power control room, and a quick push of a green button got the power flow going upstairs. Gordon continued on upstairs and up the elevator, trying to focus his mind on anything but the remains of the soldier beneath him in the water.

As Gordon made his way back down the corridor, he remembered that the two soldiers he had managed to evade in the storage room were probably still there, waiting for him to return after hearing the carnage over the radio. And, since they *did* hear the carnage, they probably wouldn't be too happy with him. He went back to the small cubby-hole room and scooped up another grenade.

Feeling somewhat safer with both hands full - a handgun in one, a grenade in the other, he continued on to the storage room where the turret had previously tried to drill him full of holes. The corridor turned right first, and then immediately left, which is where Gordon knew the storage room would be. Gordon tossed the grenade around the corner and backed up.

The soldiers didn't make a peep as the grenade exploded. Gordon swung around the corner, handgun held out in front of him in a manner halfway between professional and threatening. At least, Gordon hoped so. There was no-one in the room. No remains of soldiers, no tattered clothing, nothing. Just a big scorch mark in the corner of the room and the shattered remains of a table and radio.

Confused and wary, Gordon continued on down the ladders and to the corridors that would eventually lead him back to the control room, where Philips and Robertson would be waiting for him. As he reached the ladder that led to the walkway outside the control room, Gordon paused. There was no noise coming from the control room. Philips wasn't nervously chattering away, Robertson wasn't grunting in pain.

Either Robertson had died, or… the soldiers were in there. They had backtracked Gordon's path and come across them. Whether they had killed the two security guards, Gordon didn't know.

None of the options really appealed to him. He hoped it was just an awkward silence that had fell between the two. Holding on to hope, Gordon climbed up the ladder. He saw Robertson against the wall, breathing heavily and his skin paler than before. He gave a look to Gordon which seemed to say that he should run.

The balaclava wearing soldier stepped around the corner.

"Get in here."

Without much of an option, Gordon walked in.

The helmeted soldier was stood with Philips at the far end of the room, looking out the observation window in paranoia of the monster. Balaclava took the handgun and Martha from him, tossing them down to the corner of the room.

"How do we kill that thing?"

Gordon stared at them for a few moments. "You don't."

"Don't give me that shit. You brought it here, you must know how to kill it."

"I don't. Sorry."

"Well, you'd best find a way," Helmet said from behind Philips, pressing his handgun to the quivering security guard's throat.

"Buddy," Robertson gasped to Gordon, "just get out of here. Leave-"

"Shut up!" Balaclava yelled, whipping out his handgun and blasting a hole in Robertson's head. Philips screamed. His jaw clenched, Gordon dove at Balaclava's wrist. They struggled around the room, the soldier's gun firing off into the ceiling and the walls. Helmet was

shouting at Gordon to calm down, shoving his pistol into Philips as encouragement. But Gordon couldn't hear him. He could just see Robertson's face as the bullet passed through his head, not even having the time to look pained before his brain was spread across the wall behind him.

They stumbled towards the open observation window and toppled through, falling the considerable distance into the hall below. Gordon landed first, almost numb to the impact. Half of that was because of the HEV suit. The other half was the rage in his gut, the kind that he knew would push him past everything else. He scrambled to his feet as Balaclava did the same, his handgun off to the side from the fall. They both dove for it.

Gordon noticed it first. The rumbling of giant footsteps. His rage subsided quickly as he remembered what was in here with them. What that thing could do to him, hazard suit or no hazard suit. Helmet was screaming desperately to his friend to get the hell out, but Balaclava obviously couldn't hear him. Gordon gave up on the handgun and rolled out of the way as the big blue monster lumbered over to them. Balaclava scooped up the pistol and pointed it Gordon, a look of triumph evident under the material of his mask. And then he noticed the monster as well.

He fired blindly at it, unconcerned with Gordon. The monster lifted its arms, and Gordon knew what was coming. The flames burnt the soldier away in a matter of seconds.

His comrade, none to happy about this, leapt out of the observation window, again distracting the monster from Gordon. Philips, meanwhile, was shouting something to Gordon and pointing to the darkened corridor that the monster had originally appeared from. Gordon just nodded at him and sprinted inside, blocking out all other distractions as finally, he could do something that came naturally to him; running. The feeling of progress, of pushing yourself… Gordon loved it, and it felt fantastic to be doing it again, even if it was for a less than relaxing purpose. For a brief moment, he was running with the track team in college, his friends and family cheering him on.

He turned a corner going off to the left, and suddenly could see again. He was in another generator room. This was probably the final part of the power system, the one he would have had to switch on anyway in order to get the tram working. Two power controllers were on either side of the room with electrodes on the top. Gordon knew from his studies that this kind of generator involved a massive charge of electricity being transmitted across the two, from one to the other. And if something got in the middle of that…

Gordon nodded to himself, understanding what Philips meant. He ran between the two offline controllers, running up the four steps that led to the platform where the control panel for the generator lay. The familiar rumbling of the monster grew louder, and Gordon spotted it coming around the corner as he reached the lever that would activate the machine. It didn't seem to spot it as first, so Gordon waved at it to get its attention.

The yellow eye became red again as it recognised prey, and it lumbered forward. Gordon pulled the lever, and the generator thrummed to life. The monster stopped at the controllers, looking at them curiously, as though assessing them as a threat. A bolt of bright blue electricity sprang forth, shooting towards its twin. The monster exploded, chunks of it flying off in every direction. Gordon had to duck to allow some of it to hit the wall behind him.

The generator room thrummed around him, the sudden absence of random noises soothing Gordon as he stood up. It was then that he noticed that his glasses had not budged since he returned to the control room. That was definitely some kind of miracle. Someone, in the midst of all this, was throwing him a bone now and then. Not wanting to look a gift horse - however ironic said horse was - in the mouth, he walked to a doorway at the end of the walkway that led into little side corridor. It came out on the other side of the generator, dodging the unenviable task of trying to negotiate his way past countless volts of electricity.

He walked back the hall with the tram in the middle. There was no evidence that the soldiers were ever there except for some odd

scorch marks around the floor. Pushing the thought aside, Gordon continued on into the corridor and up to the control room. Philips was sat against the wall beside the observation window, staring at Robertson's dead body. Gordon went over to him and crouched beside him.

"They… came out of nowhere…" He was still staring at the body, his eyes red from tears.

Gordon didn't say anything.

"You've gotta believe me. I… there was nothing I could do…"

No words seemed worthy enough to answer his plea. Everything that popped into Gordon's head sounded crass and insensitive. He sighed.

"I know."

He got up, went to the tram turnstile control lever and pulled it up. Mechanical grunts echoed around the room as the tram turned. Gordon picked up Martha - with crowbar still strapped to the top - and his handgun. He turned to Philips. Unsure of what to say to console him, Gordon just settled for stating the obvious facts.

"I have to keep moving. You can come along… if you want."

The security guard didn't acknowledge him.

"… Philips?"

He looked at him, bleary eyed. Then he forced a small smile and wiped the tears from his cheeks. "Yeah… okay, yeah…" With so much effort it actually made Gordon wince, Philips got to his feet and walked over to the doorway, picking up his gun from the floor and holstering it as he went.

Satisfied that his companion wasn't going to shoot himself, Gordon turned to the doorway. He felt a hand on his shoulder and turned to

face Philips.

"I'm sorry."

Gordon frowned. Why was he apologising? Because two highly trained military commandos took him by surprise and shot someone in front of him? Because he was young and hadn't seen anything like this before?

Instead of saying this, he just offered a small smile to the security guard that he hoped communicated those words, but probably ended up just being incredibly patronising. It seemed to satisfy his young friend though, who let his hand slide from Gordon's shoulder and nodded.

They made their way down the corridor and out to the tram. Once on board, Gordon actually had trouble remembering out to operate one, at least for a brief moment. Then he remembered that he had ridden one not one hour ago, and mentally slapped himself for letting his nerves rob him of his memory. Philips sat down and rested his back against the orange control panel at the front of the tram, one hand lifted above his head to the white guardrails that covered the first fifth or so of the tram.

He gripped the throttle and thrust it forward. The tram jerked to life with a grunt, and they were on their way. Philips was either trying to sleep or just couldn't bear to keep his eyes open, Gordon didn't know. They trundled around the corner, where a barricade of boxes had been set up on the rail. Gordon crouched as the tram ploughed through them with little problem.

Philips didn't even twitch. The tram turned another corner, and Gordon tried to think of something to say. Something inspirational, something uplifting, something that would make Philips believe that this was all worthwhile.

Nothing came to mind.

(A/N: I wish Gordon would wear contact lenses. His glasses make it very hard to do proper action sequences sometimes, especially with all the jumping, leaping, running and falling needed. Ah well. As he gets better at kicking ass I suppose they'll fall of less.

Anyway, enough of my moaning. Reviews, please!

P.S. Shephard is coming.

Next Chapter: On a Rail)

On a Rail

Disclaimer: I don't own *Half-Life.*

(A/N: Do you know who does beta work for me? Hhgbh. And did you know that it's much appreciated? Because it is.)

The Black Mesa Incident

Chapter Fourteen: On A Rail

The tram came to an abrupt, automatic halt when it came to a yellow and black striped barrier. The lever to release it was on the wall opposite.

Just a security guard sat beside the lever, leaning against the wall, her helmet on the floor beside her. Her mousy hair fell just below chin level, waving back and forth as she hurriedly got her feet, straightening up as Gordon hopped off the tram. The way she looked, it was like she felt she was in the presence of a superior officer.

"Freeman. I've been waiting for you." Philips seemed to perk up at the sound of a female voice. Considering he looked like he was only just out of his teens, this wasn't really surprising. Gordon couldn't tell how old she was. Maybe between his age and Philips.

She stuck out a hand. "Veronica Bennett."

He stared at the hand for a moment before coming to his senses. "Oh. Um, Gordon Freeman."

"I know," she laughed, "I just called you Freeman, remember?"

Not knowing whether that was an insult or a joke, Gordon just gestured to Philips.

"This is…"

The young security guard stood and held out his hand, leaning over the control panel to do so. "Wayne Philips." He was still pretty shaken from Robertson's death, but seeing someone with some semblance of optimism and good cheer seemed to do him some good. The fact that she was a moderately attractive woman probably had something to do with it as well.

"Delighted," she replied happily, shaking his hand firmly but gently. She looked back to Gordon, all business. "One of your scientist pals said to give you a message. You're supposed to take this old rail system," she pointed to the tram with a vague wave of her hand, "up to some kind of satellite delivery rocket."

Gordon pursed his lips in the beginnings of asking 'where' when she spoke again.

"Now I don't know where it is exactly, and the old guy was so worried about getting out of here alive he didn't tell me. But the main thing is, the military *aborted* the launch, so when you *do* find the rocket, you'll have to get up to the control room and launch it yourself. He said something," she continued, waving her hand around in the air as she thought, "about the Lambda team needing the satellite in orbit if they were ever gonna clear up this mess? Something like that." She smiled. "Hope that clears things up."

He sighed. "Not really."

That made her smile more. "Well, just let me…" She reached over and jerked the handle on the wall up. The barrier rose surprisingly silently. Gordon was used to all mechanical things everywhere howling in agony every time they were used. With a nod of thanks, he hopped back on the tram and started her up.

"Hey, wait, where are you going?!"

Gordon stopped the tram, both he and Philips jerking forward as it stopped suddenly. He pointed ahead of him. "The… rocket."

"And you're just going to leave me here?"

"Um… no?"

"Damn right you're not." She leapt back on to the tram. "Are his manners always this bad?" she asked Philips, who just shrugged, struck speechless by this bundle of energy that was now going to be travelling with them. She gestured grandly to the room beyond. "Now you may go."

He gave a quick, slightly frightened look to Philips before he started her up. They moved forward into the next section where a tram elevator lay, waiting to take them down to the level below. The tram stopped automatically, and the elevator rotated as it descended, giving Gordon a slightly queasy feeling. The elevator came to a halt, and Gordon pushed the throttle up, and they moved on down the dark tunnel, a layer of water beneath them that Gordon wasn't sure was intentional or not. Maybe he had done it by turning on the generator earlier.

Glad for a rest, Gordon took Martha of his shoulder and dropped the handgun beside her, resting forward on the control panel. Bennett sat at an angle from Philips, resting back on the guardrail where it went down and became part of the tram.

"So, what's been happening with you guys?"

Both were silent for a few seconds, waiting for the other to speak up. When it looked like Philips was suddenly mute, Gordon opened his mouth, half turning to look over his shoulder at her.

"We came from the rocket test labs," Philips said, promptly shutting Gordon up. Happy to let the two chatter, he took his glasses off and tried to wipe them with his HEV gloved hand. It just smudged it worse, and Gordon grimaced.

"Wow. That must have been quite a walk."

"Not really. We kinda… took a shortcut."

Gordon smiled faintly as held his glasses up to the faint lights in the ceiling.

"A shortcut?"

"Well, we might have…" Philips cleared his throat. "… fallen."

"From the rocket test labs? That's quite a drop!"

Gordon got the faint impression that Bennett was mocking them, but he remained silent. A wipe with the other hand yielded similar results on his glasses, and he blew out a frustrated breath through his nose. Now he was getting angry.

"Yeah…"

"So you both worked in the test labs?"

"Nope, just me. He wandered in and killed these big tentacle monster things that were thrashing around in there. *And* a big blue monster back in that generator room."

Not listening to the conversation, Gordon took that moment to turn around and look at them with blurry eyes.

"Do either of you have a tissue?"

He could see Bennett looking to Philips, the incredulity in her voice evident. " *He* killed them?"

Laughing, Philips handed Gordon a tissue from his pocket, which he took gratefully. It only took a few seconds for the glasses to be clean and on his face once again. He smiled.

"That's better. Thank you."

He handed back the tissue and returned to the control panel, watching where they were going.

"So what's your story? How'd you get mixed up in this?"

Gordon took a breath, keeping his gaze forward. "I was there when this… started."

"Where?"

"Anomalous Materials. I was there when the reaction started and-"

"Everything went to hell."

He shrugged.

"What's the suit for? Hazardous materials?"

"Yes."

They all gripped onto something as the tram rose up, away from the water. Now it was just tram rails beneath them.

"But you don't get a helmet?"

"I didn't think I'd be needing it when the day started."

"The irony, huh?"

He just smiled.

"What about the military? Any of you come across them?" She sounded like a kid at Christmas.

Philips expression darkened. "We… just did, yeah."

"And you got rid them, too?" She whistled. "I'm impressed."

"They killed a friend of ours. It's nothing to be happy about."

"Did I say I was happy?" Gordon couldn't tell, but he was sure that Bennett was scowling. He didn't dare turn around to find out lest he become part of the argument, but he was fairly sure of it.

"No, but-"

"Then shut up."

"Wait just a minute." Philips voice rose, and so did he. "You-"

The sound of machine gun fire interrupted him. Radio chatter and shouted orders punctuated any of the brief silences, echoing down the hallway ahead of them as it arched to the right. Alien gurgles and grunts accompanied the already overloaded collection of noises, the occasional noise of electricity being 'fired' ringing into their ears.

"Face-off," Bennett whispered, now at Gordon's side without him noticing.

He nodded silently. A face-off between marines and aliens. With them in the middle.

Couldn't any portion of this journey be peaceful and stress free?

The corridor straightened up in front of them and stretched out for another fifteen feet or so. There was a turning to the left almost immediately in front of them, but the tram bypassed it for some reason. As they passed, Gordon saw electricity dancing on the left hand side platform before launching itself across and to the platform on the right. He heard a pained yell from a soldier before the battle was out of sight again.

There was another left turning coming up as the corridor arched with it. The tram followed it around, and Gordon throttled down when he saw the barrier ahead of them. He brought the tram to a stop before he reached the two platforms, one on the left, another on the right. He could just see into the right platform, where a mounted machinegun had been set up behind some sandbags. Some more

sandbags were scattered around the platform in small clumps here and there, providing areas of cover for the soldiers.

They hadn't noticed Gordon and the others yet, but he knew it was only a matter of time. Gordon knew that there were probably several soldiers on the left hand platform, judging from the noises coming from it.

So there were three platforms. One on the right, one in the middle, and one on the far left where the aliens had taken camp. And there, on the right hand side platform, surrounded by soldiers, was the lever to raise the yellow and black striped barrier that prevented them from just racing through the war zone.

Gordon got a grip on the control panel. "I'll open the barrier, you drive past, I'll jump on."

Bennett managed a 'wait', but he had already climbed up onto the control panel and hopped down onto the thin maintenance pathway that ran along either side of the rail tunnels. He made his way to the very edge of the platform, pressing his back to the wall. He had a clear view into the middle platform; all of the soldiers there were dead, and the aliens had since made their way forwards from the far left platform. They hadn't noticed him either, probably because he didn't seem *quite* as aggressive as the soldiers.

He checked the stats in the corner of his eye. Health at 93, HEV at 85. That should be enough to keep him relatively unharmed. Definitely. Absolutely. Positively.

Dead man walking, that's what he was.

After a few breaths, Gordon launched into a sprint across the platform. Some of the soldiers stopped firing and watched him pass in amazement.

"What the fuck?"

"Is that Freeman?"

Gordon wondered how and why they bothered learning his name, but decided to put it aside for another time as a bullet bounced off his thigh. It knocked him off course, causing him to topple to the side and almost bringing his head into contact with the electrified rail in the center of the track. With a push of his hands, he brought himself back up again and rolled into a run towards the lever. Green electricity lanced out in front of him, and he back-pedalled against his own forward motion like a cartoon character. He managed to avoid falling on his back and quickly made the last leg of his brief journey. It took a quick upward slam of his hand to move the lever up, and the barrier raised compliantly.

"Come on!"

It was Bennett. The tram whizzed between the two rival factions, bullets and electricity shooting past from either side in a vain attempt to kill this new arrival. Gordon waited for the orange control panel section at the front of the tram to pass before rolling on to the back section. He almost overshot it, and only Philips grip on his arm stopped from falling off the back and electrocuting himself. As the tram continued onwards, the sounds of battle faded, and Gordon lay on his back for a moment, staring up at the passing lights in the ceiling.

"Damn you know how to run!" Bennett yelled from the front, keeping her eyes on their course. "How'd you take a bullet in the leg like that?"

"It's the suit," he said, straightening his glasses and sitting up.

"And it can take bullets?"

Gordon shrugged. "Hazardous Environment Protection System." The pained look on Philips' face caught his attention.

"Yeah, no shit," she laughed. Gordon crawled over to Philips on all fours.

"Are you…?"

He spotted the bullet wound in his leg. Philips teeth were bared in a brave attempt to hide any discomfort, but it didn't really work.

"Might need a… first aid kit or something…"

Bennett turned around at that, and gasped. "Holy crap! When did-" She shook her head at her own comment. "Never mind." Looking at Gordon, she jabbed her thumb in the direction of the control panel, and he did as he was told. He didn't look back at Bennett made her ministrations to the injured guard.

"Ow!"

"Oh, stop complaining, you big baby."

"Baby? I've just been shot!"

"Wah, wah."

"Do you even know what you're doing?"

"I've got some medical training. My dad being a scientist, he practically blackmailed me into it."

Gordon turned to look at her. "Your father wouldn't be Thomas Bennett?"

She sighed, as though she had to have this conversation everyday. "Yeah, that's him."

Philips looked between them. "Who's Thomas Bennett?"

Bennett smiled. "Finally! Someone who *doesn't* know."

"He's a scientist with Black Mesa. Worked on the early teleporter technology."

"Isn't that the stuff that started his whole mess?" Philips asked, sounding almost accusatory.

His would-be doctor heard it too. "I don't think I like your tone."

"I wasn't using a tone."

"Yes you were. It was like you were blaming my dad for all of this."

"Well I've just been shot! I think I should be allowed to blame someone for a few minutes!"

She was silent for a few moments. "Yeah, I guess so."

"Right. So, what are you planning on doing with my l-AAAAAAAAGH!"

"There. Bandaged up and ready to roll," she said with false cheer. She stood up and joined Gordon at the control panel. "You know where you're going?"

"Not really."

"Then I'll drive."

Gordon shifted, feeling uncomfortable with that idea for some reason. "You could just direct me-"

"Oh my God, you don't have something about women drivers, do you?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Good. In that case, I'll drive."

"What about…?" he nodded in Philips direction, keeping his voice down.

"He'll be okay until we reach the rocket complex. There should be some medical supplies there," she said, gently nudging him off the controls as she spoke.

"And if there aren't?"

Her eyes remained locked firmly on the route ahead. "Keep him awake."

Tempted to say something else - although he wasn't sure what at this juncture - Gordon just nodded and sat down beside his injured friend, who lay with has back to the low guardrail. It seemed ideal for sitting against, almost as though it were designed that way.

"How are you feeling?"

Philips shot him a look that reminded Gordon of Barney. It was a look that said 'Gordon, I know you're a genius and all, but sometimes you're really stupid.'

"Sorry."

"Look… no offence, but I really don't feel like talking right now."

"But…" Gordon pointed awkwardly to Bennett' back. "You have to stay awake."

After a scowl at the back of Bennett head that Gordon was surprised she couldn't feel, Philips sighed resignedly. "Okay. Let's talk."

And so, Gordon started a conversation about his work. Or at least, tried to. As soon as he got to the topic of the phase two emitters modulating the resistance frequency of any given sample as long as it was in a state of flux, Philips seemed more then moderately disinterested, so Gordon changed the subject to his favourite foods.

This, remarkably, didn't help either, so Gordon asked Philips what he wanted to talk about. Which was baseball. And although he knew less than nothing about the sport, he nodded along with Philips as he went on about the best game he ever saw, laughed when he mocked the other teams, and shook his head as he berated members of his own team that hadn't performed up to snuff.

Philips had just asked Gordon which team was his favourite when the wall on the left of the tram disappeared so they were side by side with another rail. And another tram, this with two soldiers on board. Both brought their weapons around the bear as both Gordon and Bennett did the same with their handguns.

"Stalemate, fellas," Bennett smirked.

The two soldiers, one wearing a beret and the other a bandana on his head, smirked back. Beret nodded down the corridor, and Gordon chanced a glance over in that direction. At the very end of the corridor, perched on a corner, Gordon could see a soldier stood behind some big metal contraption. There was a flash, and something came out of the front of it, pausing for a millisecond before launching forward at them. Gordon grabbed Bennett by the shirt and pulled her down as he ducked. The rocket soared over their heads and down the corridor, exploding on the wall of the corner in the distance.

Their enemies took that moment to attack, and Gordon leapt at them, taking the brunt of their machinegun fire with his HEV suit. He landed on Bandana, losing the handgun to the rail as the tram shot along. Beret pointed his M4 at Gordon's head, pressing it against his temple, and Bandana smiled beneath him.

A loud gunshot rang out, knocking Beret back and off the tram, dying as soon as he came into contact with the electrified center rail. Both Gordon and Bandana looked over at Bennett, crouched behind the control panel to avoid the rockets with Martha firmly grasped in her fingers. Enraged, Bandana kicked Gordon off of him, knocking him back. Gordon's eyes went wide and he flailed as he thought he

would fall into the gap between trams. He fell on his back, his head dangling off the side. Before Bennett could fire, Bandana was on top of him, pressing his head down, intending to scrape it off on the concrete between rails.

Or at least, that's what Gordon thought at first. A quick glance up ahead quickly corrected him as he realised another partition between rails was coming up again, and Bandana intended to decapitate him.

This is why you should wear the helmet, Gordon.

The butt of a shotgun whacked into Bandana's face, his nose breaking and blood spurting with a crunch. Gordon roughly shoved him off and scrambled to his feet, leaping from one tram to the other just as the wall whipped past, closing them off from their enemy. He got into a crouch, and, noting Bennett holding Martha like a baseball bat, nodded gratefully. She silently waved off his thanks.

"We've still got rocket boy."

The tram reached the end of the corridor, where the rocket launcher was based, and turned, gradually revealing the soldier to them. Bennett aimed Martha not at the soldier, but at the rocket launcher. There was a brief spark, and then it exploded, filling the tunnel with blinding hot fire that almost caught up with them before fizzling out into smoke.

"Let's do it again," Philips coughed. Bennett smiled and shook her head, and Gordon just sat down. He scowled when he realised his glasses were smudged again.

The next half hour or so was spent in relative quiet, at least as far as the whole 'aliens and/or military attacking' thing went. Gordon silently tried to clean his glasses himself before asking Philips for the tissue again. Bennett and Gordon talked a little about her father and where she thought he was, and if he was even still alive. Philips and Bennett discussed their individual stories of getting into the Black Mesa security program while Gordon stood vigil at the control panel.

He started to feel comfortable. Travelling with people he could easily call friends towards a goal that was simple, to the point, and uncomplicated. Bennett and Philips laughed at some shared story of the security hazard course, and Gordon couldn't help smiling himself.

The tram came to a halt as they came to a broken tram elevator. The black and yellow striped rail that the tram would usually grip onto was warped and bent at an angle, and, judging by the scorch marks, was probably deliberate.

"I hope we're almost there…" Bennett muttered, getting to her feet and helping Philips to his, wrapping his arm around her shoulder. An open platform lay beside them, the only thing of interest a red ladder descending into a hole in the ground. Gordon and Bennett looked to Philips concernedly.

He waved his free hand and smiled. "I'll be okay. Just have to… take it slow."

"We'll go before you," Bennett said. When Philips cocked an eyebrow at her, she finished the sentence with, "so you won't fall."

"… okay."

"What? What's odd about that?"

Gordon didn't know himself, so after slinging Martha over his shoulder, he got climbing. He tried not to look down when he realised this ladder went a *long* way. Bennett went in above him, and then Gordon couldn't look up either, at least not without blushing furiously. Considering the fact that the tunnel for the ladder was lit emergency red, nobody would notice. But Gordon would only be all too aware of the fact that he was staring up at a woman's rear while he climbed, so he decided to just focus on his hands. It would be a shame for Bennett to stand on them, after all. Yes. Yes, that was a good reason.

He heard Philips gasp every time he bent his leg, but about halfway down, he converted over to mumbled curses every now and again. Gordon occupied his mind trying to guess which curse words and combinations Philips would use, but it quickly became boring as Philips became more and more incoherent with his annoyed cries.

Eventually they reached the bottom of the shaft, and Philips almost fell on Bennett as she reached the ground floor. Feeling like a gentleman, Gordon handed Martha to Bennett and took Philips' arm around his shoulder. Both security guards gave him grateful smiles, and they walked out into the corridor, walking along the right hand side pathway that ran along the side of the rail. They approached a corner going to the left. Gordon could see boxes on both left and right pathways, although there were patches of pathway to be seen. Gordon let Philips rest against the wall and took Martha from Bennett. She watched with a look of wonder as he unwrapped his crowbar from the top and walked off down the corridor towards the box that would eventually cause them problems.

As he walked, he got a look down the corridor. The rail came to a dead end, with what looked like a platform on the right. But on the wall, written in big black spray painted letters, were the words 'SURRENDER FREEMEN'. And below that was a small bunker with a slit in the front, two very large guns poking out and pointing right at him. He threw himself back as the soldier in the bunker finally seemed to notice his presence and fire, lodging three rapid fire bullets into the wall.

Bennett ran to Gordon's side as he scrambled to his feet. "What the hell's that?"

"It's a bunker with a gun in it."

"Big gun?"

"Oh yes."

"Crap."

He nodded, short on breath. "Yes."

"Any ideas?"

Gordon's heart sank, though he tried not to show it. He was hoping she would have the plan; she had come up with all of the instructions so far, after all. Gently, he tugged Martha from her grip and handed his crowbar to Philips, who had sat down against the wall when Gordon had said 'bunker with gun in it'. Obviously he expected to be here for some time while they took care of this. His blasé faith in them was quite heartening, actually. He took the crowbar with a nod and wink.

"I think I can jump from platform to platform; there are gaps between the boxes on either side."

"Convenient gaps?"

"… yes, why?"

"Sounds a bit trap-like to me, is all."

"There's already a big gun," Gordon said, frowning in confusion. How could it be a trap if they were already trying to kill them?

Bennett thought for a moment. "Good point." She whipped out her handgun, cocked it, and with a second thought, took Philips' gun as well.

"Always wanted to do a John Woo."

"Who?"

"No, 'Woo'."

"What?"

"Never mind."

With that out of the way, Bennett sprinted down the corridor, into and past the line of fire before taking cover behind a box on the other side. Only two bullets were spurted out that time. She nodded for Gordon to get on the left hand platform with an urgent nod and flick of her eyes.

Gordon did so, his feet hitting the very edge of the platform. He almost toppled back onto the electrified rail but by leaning Martha forward, he managed to pull himself back forward. He went around the corner and ducked below the waist-high box, narrowly avoiding another shower of bullets. Gordon looked to the right. Just ahead of him was a gap between two crates, the one in front tall enough for Gordon to slam into without getting hit. He glanced back at Bennett and nodded, who returned the gesture. Gordon slung Martha over his shoulder and held up his hand, counting down from three.

On 'one', Bennett whipped around and let loose a volley of gunfire at the bunker. After five or so shots, she stopped, and Gordon ran, leaping across the gap and landing on the platform opposite and slamming into the wall. The soldier in the bunker didn't even get a chance to fire, but obviously saw where he went, because the sound of bullets slicing through dangerously thin wood assaulted Gordon's ears.

More gunfire echoed from behind, coming from Bennett attempting to draw the enemy fire away. Gordon studied the crate that towered above him. He could see light seeping through the gaps in the wood. On a guess, Gordon cocked Martha and fired her into the crate, squeezing his eyes shut to stop any splinters. He heard the spray of pellets ripping into the wood, and when he opened his eyes, saw a messy hole torn through it.

Bennett ran out of bullets behind him, and Gordon ran through the box, ending up on the station platform he had spied at the end of the corridor. Two soldiers, M4 rifles at the ready, took aim at him, as well as the high powered guns in the bunker. A pillar stood next to the bunker, and Gordon kept on going, tucking himself just between

them, shielding himself from both the soldiers and the high powered gun.

He cocked Martha and swung around the corner, aiming as high on the soldier's bodies as he could. The soldier on the left fell back as the spray tore through his face, blood spattering on ground behind him. His companion opened fire, and Gordon leapt to the ground as he cocked Martha again, landing on his side. This shot went into the soldier's knee, knocking him onto his front. Gordon cocked Martha again as he got to his feet, and didn't hesitate to pull the trigger again before the soldier could do the same.

Without pausing, Gordon put Martha over his shoulder and unhooked one of the grenades from the soldier's belt. He walked to the side of the bunker, pulled the pin, and casually tossed the grenade into the observation slit that the gun was poking out of. He backed up, expecting a large explosion, and was surprised when there was just a subdued thump noise that reverberated along the floor. Some blood spurted out of the front, marking the rail floor in front of it.

Silence filled the tunnel. Gordon stared at the blood on the rail.

"Um… Freeman? We… good to go?"

It was Bennett. Gordon blinked, and then shook his head. He had forgotten about others being in the tunnel with him.

"Yes…" He nodded, and then cleared his throat, speaking louder for Bennett and Philips to hear. "Yes, all clear."

It took a good fifteen minutes for Bennett to crack her way through the boxes with the crowbar. Gordon went back with her and helped Philips around to the platform. Philips looked away when he saw the dead bodies on the floor, and Bennett winced.

Gordon had done neither, and he had been the one *doing* the killing. But he was surviving. He was helping people. That was important. A

little voice in his head rang out in response.

But important enough to kill for?

He wasn't sure. Right now he was stuck in the middle of everything and it was difficult for him to see five minutes from now, let alone what he would think of his actions in a day. His conscience and morals were taking a backseat to the here and now. To the guns being pointed at his head and his friends. And he wasn't just thinking of Bennett and Philips. There was Johnson, bleeding to death somewhere else in the facility while Thorpe could only feverishly try to keep him alive long enough for some kind of help to arrive - if it ever did. Harv and Peterson, waiting down in the office complex. Eli and his family, trapped in the deepest, darkest depths of the Anomalous Materials sector. Dr Kleiner, probably fascinated by the specimens surrounding him, completely oblivious to the danger. Barney, doing God knows what, if he was even alive anymore.

So, for the moment, he would do whatever he could to survive. To reach someone. And if he had to kill to do that… right here, right now, he would do it. The future (or lack of), at this point, was for optimists and pessimists. Gordon was here. And he had to do what he had to do.

And just like that, Gordon Freeman was a survivor.

At the far end of the platform was a corridor going off to the left, and, after safely depositing Philips against a wall, Gordon and Bennett cautiously investigated.

There was a door on the right, and after an experimental twist of the handle, Bennett found it was unlocked and pushed it open a crack so she could poke her head out. Gordon could see the night sky above them through the small opening. It *night* already. An entire day had gone by. How had that happened? True, he had been teleported around for awhile in Anomalous Materials, so God knows how long that had taken. But still… the sun had been so bright and hot when he had been on the surface with the military. And now it was night.

And judging from the black velvet of the sky and the dewy air coming through, it had been night for some time.

Time flies when you're fighting monsters.

Gordon couldn't see much of what was outside. A concrete floor in front of them and a wall to the right where some crates were haphazardly stacked in the far corner. The sudden noise of voices made Gordon grip Martha.

"So who is this guy, 'Freeman'?"

Bennett looked up at him with a cocked eyebrow, looking mock impressed.

"They say he was at ground zero." That voice was far younger.

"Science team? You think he was responsible for sabotage, maybe?"

"Maybe." There was obvious venom in his voice as he spoke. "All I know for sure is that he's been killing my buddies."

Hearing someone so young making a threat against his life made his gut feel uncomfortable, so Gordon tried to concentrate on the contours of the weapon he held in his hand.

"Oh, yeah. He'll pay. He will *definitely* pay."

Bennett quietly closed the door, holding the handle down until the door was completely shut before lifting it up, thereby avoiding the click.

"Well," she said, smiling, "looks like you're popular."

Gordon just 'hmm'ed his agreement, not wanting to get into this discussion.

"I think there's two of them, but there's no way to tell."

"We'll see when we're out there."

"You don't stop, do you?"

He shrugged, then cocked Martha. "Can't."

A blank stare from her made him feel slightly awkward before she just nodded. "Okay. Wait a minute."

She ran off down the corridor, turning right onto the platform. When she came back, she was holding one of the deceased soldier's M4 rifles between her hands. She tapped a big protrusion on the bottom of the barrel.

"Grenade launcher. Time it right, blow them both up."

Gordon nodded his agreement, and reached for the door handle. Slowly, he pushed it down and left the door slightly ajar. After a brief glance at his fellow fighter, he kicked the door open and ran out into the open. The soldiers were stood on his left, just below the loading platform he was stood on. A guardrail stood between them, a few steps off to the right of the platform allowing easy access to the outdoor rail.

They turned in alarm just as Bennett rushed out. With a squeeze of the secondary trigger, the grenade launched from the bottom of the M4 and landed right between the soldiers, sending both flying in opposite directions and out of their way. Bennett looked down at the smoking weapon, and then to Gordon.

"I think that worked pretty well."

He looked at her. Was she *enjoying* this? Was she killing people and smiling and joking about it? Gordon wondered what Dr Bennett would think of that. The soldiers looked quite dead, so Gordon descended from the raised platform and stood on the concrete walkway that stood beside the rail.

"Train station, huh?"

Gordon nodded, looking around. On their right was a huge archway, the mammoth doors locked firmly shut. The rail led straight into it, which led Gordon to believe that that was how they would leaving after the rocket was launched. To the left the rail continued on and curved left around to another closed off archway. Judging from its' position, Gordon guessed that the other side was where the bunker with the mounted gun was. Across from them on the opposite side of the tracks were two large metal blast doors, a small keypad beside them.

With a quick run and a jump, he was on the other side, and he heard Bennett do the same behind him as he wandered over to the panel, tossing Martha onto his shoulder. He studied the nine digit number pad, but settled for pressing the big red one above them all. A loud groan made Bennett jump, and the door opened up surprisingly fast. They stepped through, and another pair of blast doors awaited them, with the same kind of control panel waiting in the airlock-esque room. When he pressed the red button, the doors behind them closed as the ones in front opened.

And there was the rocket. Or at least, there was the rocket beneath the ground. In the centre of the courtyard before them, the ground gradually went downwards towards a large metal circle, which Gordon knew was a door that would open up to allow the rocket to launch. Almost to the finish line. Well, the finish line of *this* task. There probably a hundred more waiting for him around the corner.

There were tall walls either side of them that stopped a few feet ahead, and Gordon strode ahead with a confidence he still didn't feel.

"I didn't sign on for this *shit."* Gordon froze. The voice of the soldier echoed around the courtyard.

"That's for sure, but civilians? Who ordered this operation anyway?"

He looked back to Bennett, and then just sighed. Only one thing for it. He took one stop out into the open, and a bullet whizzed past his face.

"Squad! We got Freeman!"

After a quick back-pedal so he was behind the wall, he sighed and looked at Bennett, who was already hefting her M4, ready for battle. Gordon pressed his back to the wall, and was about to whirl around to fire on his enemies when he saw something in the very left hand corner of the courtyard. A mounted machine gun, set up behind a small wall of sandbags. It must have been put there when the military first forced their way into the rocket test labs. Gordon pointed in that direction to Bennett, who nodded. Hopefully she got the idea that *he* was going in that direction, not her.

He tossed Martha to the floor, and, after a few seconds of hopping up and down on the spot, Gordon launched into a full on sprint, running out into the open and to the machine gun almost in a straight line. Bennett's cover fire seemed to do the trick, because with a quick dive and a roll, Gordon was safely behind the sandbags. He scrambled to one knee behind the gun, took aim, and fired at the soldiers on the opposite side of the courtyard, who were themselves hidden behind some random stacks of sandbags. Behind them was a red metal fire door leading into the complex behind them; the rocket test lab.

When they showed no signs of coming up, Gordon settled for simply obliterating the sandbags, and fired. Clouds of sand puffed into the air as the machinegun ripped through them. While he did this, Bennett swung around the corner and aimed her M4 at the soldiers, but tilting it up in the air slightly. She fired the grenade launcher, her entire body rebounding from the force, and the grenade shot into the air. It landed with a loud explosion behind the sandbags, sending two bodies flying into the air and down into the rocket pit. A third flew off the side and slammed into the wall, going so fast as to bounce and roll back along the ground.

Gordon ceased fire and got to his feet. He tried not to look at the inert bodies of the soldiers in the rocket pit as he walked back to Bennett, who had taken off her helmet to wipe some sweat from her forehead.

"New Mexico sure is hot, huh?" she said, only the slightest touches of irony in her voice.

He didn't answer as he picked up Martha and walked to the red doors, wary of any surviving soldiers behind the sandbags. Finding none, he went inside, the doors sliding silently open for him compliantly. They followed the white, brightly lit corridor around a right turn, coming out into a hallway with a wide stairwell on their immediate left. A closed secure door stood at the top.

Gordon looked up. Red lasers ran horizontally across the ceiling every metre or so, attached to a dozen or so sticks of dynamite on the wall. That was a dozen sticks for each of the six or so lasers. The lasers stopped a few metres in front of the door, leaving a gap. There was no way to get up the stairs and to the door without setting off the dynamite and blowing up the whole place. Two metal crates were in the right hand side of the room. He handed Martha to Bennett and walked over to them, judging their width and height. There was a slight gap between the wall and the stone banister of the stairs.

With a grunt, he pushed the metal crate towards the gap and managed to squeeze it in. Minding his head, he climbed on top. His arms could just hook themselves over the banister. With a smile to Bennett, he heaved himself up and over. The security guard gave him a thumbs up.

"I'll wait here."

"All right."

The scientist went inside, the door opening automatically. The lab was quite big, certainly bigger than Gordon was expecting. The dead bodies of scientists lay scattered around the place, some leaning

forward in their chairs against their keyboards, bullet holes in the back of their heads indicating just how sudden the military's attack had been. A hologram of the planet was the centrepiece of the room, the words 'Satellite Portal System - Offline' rotating around it. Gordon took that as his cue and looked for the rocket launch controls. A quick exploration of the cramped, claustrophobic facility yielded a small room with observation ports looking out over the rocket pit.

On the opposite side of the room from the windows was a control panel with flickering screens above it. The one on the left had an image of the closed archway at the outdoor tram station. He pushed the appropriate button, and the door slowly opened. Not bothering to watch it open all the way, Gordon walked to the observation window, where a large red button stood out between them with the word 'LAUNCH' pasted above it in big black letters.

After a quick jog back to Bennett to make sure she didn't wander outside while the rocket was launching, Gordon went to the button and slammed his palm down on it. Alarms sounded, and metal layers slid down the observation ports, an even smaller slit allowing others to watch the rocket launch. The door to the control room shut as well, so Gordon decided he might as well enjoy the show.

First he heard the steady thrum of the metal door opening, and could only imagine what was happening to the bodies of those soldiers. Maybe they'd fall into the rocket prep chamber. Maybe they'd end up going off into space with it. Either way, he certainly hoped they were already dead.

The rocket launched, slowly rising out of the hole, suddenly making Gordon feel small and insignificant. The long white rocket seemed to go on forever as it made its' way out of its' home and into the night sky, leaving behind only a blinding burst of white light as its' engines came into full view. Gordon found the concept that they were the same rocket engines that killed those tentacle things hard to grasp. He wasn't sure why. That just seemed so far away now, it felt hard to consider that these completely separate events were linked.

With the rocket safely away, the alarms stopped, and the door opened again, as did the metal covers on the observation ports. Gordon leant against the port, closing his eyes and bowing his head. He blew out a long breath.

Then he stood to his feet, scooped up the first aid kit from a large green box on the wall, and made his way back to Bennett.

Philips was glad to see them, although he looked far paler than before. Bennett immediately got to work on them while Gordon went for an explore through the open archway outside. A tram was waiting for them, like a bus waiting at a stop. He smashed open the crates surrounding it, but didn't find anything of much interest. He checked his stats. Both were just a little below eighty. Not bad.

"Find anything you like?"

Gordon turned at the comment, and saw Philips entering the archway, flanked by Bennett. He was using a plank of wood as a crutch, leaving Bennett free to grip her M4 with both hands. The scientist poked a thumb towards the waiting tram.

Bennett smiled. "Let's rock and roll, shall we?"

Both Gordon and Philips exchanged a worried look as Bennett hopped up onto the tram, eagerly taking the controls. She looked back to them.

"Let's go, chop chop!"

With a look of resignation, the men got on board and gripped onto whatever was available. Bennett sighed.

"Let's get the hell out of here."

She slammed the acceleration lever up and the tram burst to life, taking them around the bend and into places unknown. Gordon didn't know whether Bennett was talking about the rocket test area,

or just the Black Mesa facility in general. Either way, he agreed with her. He could do with a good long rest right now. He sat back against the guardrail and closed his eyes, the steady rocking noise of the tram lulling him to sleep.

(A/N: *Half-Life 2: Episode Two* is awesome. Not just awesome, but *shocking* . Some of those plot twists had me gaping. Makes me want to finish this up sooner so I can get to writing about it.

If I'm not an old man by then, of course.

All reviews much appreciated!

P.S. Shephard is *still* coming. He's on his way, seriously.

Next Chapter: Power Struggle)

Power Struggle

Disclaimer: I don't own *Half-Life.*

(A/N: Thank you, hhgbh! 'What for?' other readers may ask. For superb beta work of course!)

The Black Mesa Incident

Chapter Fifteen: Power Struggle

The first thing Barney saw upon turning the corner was an old fashioned explosive detonator box, complete with T-shaped handle on the top. Something about the old fashioned simplicity of it made him smile. The fuse lead from the box to a very secure, indestructible looking door on the left of the corridor he was now entering. The control panel beside it had been ripped from the wall, dangling by a few scarce multi-coloured wires. Obviously the military had tried the quiet way in before the big exploding way, which surprised Barney a bit. They were probably distracted by his arrival before they could blow the door up. He looked eagerly at the detonator but, rather than tempt fate, he let it be.

Which was a shame, because Barney enjoyed big explosions. He turned around and headed down the corridor towards the other side, where, at the end and on the left hand side, there was an opening leading somewhere else. Barney stepped out onto a metal walkway that went immediately to his left, his boots clanking against it as he walked. It overlooked a veritable lake of bright bluish green liquid, which Barney took to be coolant. It was almost overflowing onto the walkway, only just below it. Two complicated looking spires grew out of the ceiling like stalactites, going under the surface of the liquid.

Barney looked to the end of the walkway, where a bridge over to another walkway on the opposite side was. Or at least, should have been. The bridge looked like it had been destroyed somehow, and

there was a gap in the middle that was far too big to jump over, and Barney had no desire to swim in the glowing stuff beneath him. Didn't look nice. There was a door in the wall behind it. Probably just where he needed to go, too. He noticed some barrels gently bobbing up and down in the liquid, and occasionally made out the word 'COOLANT' written on the side. It didn't do him much good, but there was that something in the back of his head that forced him to take note of it, before he headed back to the door with the explosives attached.

As he reached it, Barney sighed and shrugged.

"I guess I've got no choice but to blow it up," he said out loud to no-one. With relish, he slammed his hands down on the detonator, and watched as the spark travelled along the wire. Then he realised the door would probably explode quite violently, so he took cover in the corridor he had first come down.

He covered his ears from the explosion, and whooped with joy as he saw metal fragments and dust being blown down the corridor next to him. After laughing far too much for such a relatively small event, Barney went back around the corner and through the small, scorching hot hole that had been created in the bottom of the door.

Once through, he travelled up a ladder on his left and came up against some five or so headcrabs. With his M4, the ease with which he killed them almost filled him with a sense of euphoria. He was so used to those little bastards being pains in the ass that being rid of them so quickly was a treat. He went through a corridor in front of him and came out in a coolant observation area, stood on a platform that overlooked two entranceways to the left. On his right was a gauge of the coolant pressure, which was rather high right now.

First, he went into the doorway on the left, ending up in a small room that overlooked the lake of coolant, broken bridge and floating barrels included. A rusted wheel was attached to the wall, the words 'COOLANT LEVEL' pasted above it. With a shrug, he turned it the

only way would go; left. After about ten minutes of solid turning, the wheel wouldn't go any further.

Barney looked out the window. No change. He grit his teeth, glaring down at the wheel as though it were to blame.

"Then what the hell was the point?" With a yell of frustration, he kicked the wheel. Suddenly, with a noise akin to a toilet being flushed, the coolant started to drain away. Barney smiled in satisfaction, although he wasn't sure if the lack of coolant in that room was a good thing or a bad thing.

More out of curiosity than a solid plan, Barney went out and headed into the second doorway he had seen, where an elevator not unlike the one he had travelled down from Dr Rosenberg's lab was waiting for him. Again, with a lack of options, Barney stepped inside and descended, ending up in a dark, dank airlock area. Both doors were open, and Barney stepped outside into the bottom of the now empty coolant tank. The floor was concrete with the occasional metal grate built into it, through which the glowing coolant could be seen.

Barney looked up. He could see the broken bridge so very high above him. With a dejected sigh, Barney looked around. There were four barrels that now lay randomly strewn about. Then an idea occurred to him that was so great, he could feel the heat from the light bulb above his head. He tossed his M4 to the floor so he could work quicker, and, with little time on his hands, pushed the barrels into place roughly beneath the gap in the bridge.

Ten minutes later he was done. Breathing heavily and sweating far too much, true, but he was done. He scooped up his M4 and rushed back up to the coolant levels room, turning the crank in the opposite direction as fast as it would go. For good measure, he kicked it when he was done, not wanting to upset his karma. The coolant levels rose, and Barney watched the barrels intently. He smiled when he saw them form a makeshift floating bridge between the two broken edges of the walkway.

His smile still on his face as he ran, Barney made his way back down the ladder, through the exploded hole in the door and back to the coolant tank, where, with no small measure of pride, he hopped from one barrel to the other.

As he reached the final barrel, a huge teleportation event occurred in front of him, the green flash depositing only one creature; the huge tank like thing that had been his final obstacle in that alien world. Barney remembered the seeking insect type things that dug into his back. They weren't particularly nice.

He leapt forward from the final barrel, going into a roll as he hit the walkway and aiming his M4 at the weapon/claw thing that was the alien's excuse for a right hand. With a brief prayer to the almighty Lord, Barney fired the secondary trigger. Answering his prayers, the weapon fired a grenade straight into the creature's weapon hand, blowing it to pieces and splattering yellow blood across the bridge of Barney's nose. He closed his eyes as the liquid hit, but quickly opened them again. The creature was writhing in pain, back-pedalling as it cradled its dismembered hand with its… claw.

Barney sprinted to the door, and it automatically opened in seeming slow motion. Barney yelled at it and slammed his hands on it in an effort to get it moving quicker, which didn't work, much to his annoyance. Finally there was a big enough gap for him to rush through, and he went in. The corridor was badly lit, and Barney barrelled straight into something, knocking whatever it was on its back.

"Sorry," he managed as he got to his feet, "didn't mean to-"

It was one of those electricity aliens. Like the one who had helped him back on the border world. It seemed ready to attack, so Barney put his hands up and wracked his brain for what the alien had said to him.

"Uh… Gar Jung. Gar Jung? Is that right? Gar Jung!"

The alien paused, tilting its' head curiously. It blinked.

Barney smiled and nodded. "Yeah, yeah, see? I'm okay, your buddy helped me. Gar Jung."

It seemed to be understanding, and lowered its clawed hands. Then it screamed, making Barney back up instinctively. It clutched at the thick green collar around its neck, which was beginning to glow along with the green bonds on its wrists and ankles. As suddenly as it started, the screaming stopped, and the creature looked back up at Barney. Looking almost apologetic, it rubbed its hands together, green energy glowing from between its palms.

"What? What're you doing? I'm a buddy! Gar Jung, remember? Gar Jung!"

It wasn't stopping, and its look of apology had become one of intense sorrow. Barney raised his M4.

"… sorry."

The creature closed its' eyes, and Barney fired. It flopped back limply to the ground, thudding dully to the ground. Barney stared down at the creature. It looked almost blissful. Like it was glad to be dead.

It was an image that would haunt him for the rest of his life.

Barney felt like he had just shot a friend. He squeezed his eyes shut and forced the tears welling there back and away from where they came from. With a loud sniff and a wipe under his eyes just to be sure he was rid of any tears, Barney got to his feet and continued on down the dark corridor. He hoped to God that he didn't come across any more of those creatures. If he did, he would just have to run. There was no way he was taking any more of their lives. Because now Barney knew what they were.

They were slaves. He had no idea who to, but it was clear now. His friend back on the alien world had been free of those green

manacles on the neck, ankles and wrists. All of the other aliens of that type he had come across had been wearing them. Barney closed his eyes. He had killed so many of them on his way here… and they had all been slaves.

He concentrated on his current task, knowing that he would have a chance to dwell on all of this once he was out, along with every other horrible thing he had seen and heard today.

On his way to the power generator control room (which was handily pointed out by signs on the walls), Barney passed by a small gap in the wall with a guardrail in front of it. It overlooked the walkway that the huge alien had been standing on. But it wasn't there anymore. He decided that it must have gone back home. Barney found the power generator room with little trouble just off to the side of that guardrail, where he found another thin, wide observation port overlooking the pool of coolant. In front of him were two sets of green and red buttons, the red on both lit up.

He pressed the green buttons simultaneously. Slowly, the pillar opened up, forming a long triangular shell around the center of the pillar. They started to spin around, faster and faster until a blinding flash of light made Barney looked away. When he brought his gaze back, there was a glowing sphere of light in the middle of each pillar. He took that to mean the generator was working again.

Barney made his way to the guardrail and vaulted over, in no mood to walk over the dead body of an innocent, sentient creature. He couldn't even look back at the door where it had happened. He just hopped from barrel to barrel and made his way back to the office area where he had first been attacked by the soldiers.

The dam area with the walkways had become much more active, feeling like a light shower of rain as he walked in front of the flowing water. It felt good, and he took a moment to remove his helmet and let the cool water wash over him.

After a few seconds, he slipped the helmet back on and continued on back to the office area. Thanks to the generator, it was much better lit now, revealing every crappy detail about the supposedly white painted offices. Paint cracked and hung from the walls, ceiling tiles were missing, tables were missing legs… overall, one hell of a place to work.

He passed by a cracked window without looking into the office. Something big and brown suddenly smashed out of it and struck him in the belly, knocking him back down the middle corridor and into the wall. Barney's grip on his M4 slipped immediately.

The one armed alien burst through the rest of the window, and stared down the corridor at Barney, one thing on its mind. If it even *had* a mind. Slowly, with its one clawed arm, it picked up the M4 at its feet. With nary a squeeze, it crushed the metal until the gun was bent in the middle at a right angle. It tossed the gun away and charged towards him. Barney scrambled to his feet, fumbling for his revolver. He brought it up and around, cocking the hammer back as he did so.

Just as the creature reached him, he fired a bullet directly into its face, blowing through a cheek. It's head whipped away before slowly coming back around to look down at him. The hole in its cheek didn't seem to dissuade it. Up close, Barney could see just how ugly the damn things were. Four tiny red eyes with a pointy toothed mouth that opened vertically rather than horizontally. On its large chest was another idly hanging third arm, with only two small claws growing off it.

The creature brought its left arm up round about its head. Barney unloaded the remaining three bullets from his weapon into the creatures' belly. Undeterred, the creature swung its' arm down and swatted him forward. He collided with the thin outer wall of one of the offices, leaving a sizeable dent in the fragile structure. The revolver slipped from his grasp as he turned around in time to see the huge left hand whipping around to meet him again.

He crashed backwards through the wall, sliding over the surface of a desk and into the wall of that office. Dust clouded his vision as he struggled to his feet. The already cracked window of the office he was in smashed inwards as the creature charged through, going straight for him like a bull. Barney dove off to his right and out into the corridor, slicing his bare arm - from bandaging his injured leg in the alien world - on the shattered glass below.

Cursing the lack of safety glass, Barney scrambled to his feet and ran, the creature following and closing fast, which was surprising and terrifying considering its bulk. Barney reached the small room where he had surprised the soldiers. Beside the metal door he had rammed down, Barney could make out the blowtorch the soldier had been using, its user's hand still lightly grasping it. The tank of gas was attached to it, stood up in the corner of the room. A quick glimpse at the dead body of a soldier gave him everything else he needed.

As he turned on the gas, the monstrous creature smashed through the small wooden frame of the entrance to the office, towering over him like an enraged bear. Barney dove for the blowtorch as the creature came after him. He whipped it up and around into the mouth of his hunter before flicking the lighter he had taken from the dead soldier. He shoved it into the monsters mouth, lighting the blowtorch. It blew a hole through the creatures' head, and it died with almost no noise, interrupted in mid-roar. It threatened to collapse on him, so Barney rolled out of the way.

Barney was so tired from the running and fighting he felt like he could throw up. He hadn't had anything to eat or drink since this day began, and only God knew what time it was now. For all he knew it could have been two days since he'd last had breakfast. That thought wasn't something that made him happy, so Barney walked out into the corridor he had first entered into from Rosenberg's lab and headed to the door into the power cell charging room. His arm stung from the cuts the broken glass had made, and with a wince and a hiss through his clenched teeth he noticed some of the glass had become embedded in his skin.

Something for Rosenberg to tend to later, he resolved. Right now he just wanted out of his hellhole of a place.

The door now opened for him, and Barney entered the room. On his left was a small slot that only something like a medium sized old fashioned TV could be pushed through. A red button lay beside it, and Barney figured it was to transport the power cells up to the lab above.

On his right was a large chain link fence, behind it some contraption Barney hoped would charge up a power cell. There was a door made of the same material, a badly bleeding and sweating security guard sat in front of it, crouched forward. He barely registered Barney's presence until he was crouched beside him, trying to see how severe his wounds were. Judging by the amount of blood he had lost to the concrete floor below, he was probably a goner anyway. But Barney wasn't about to let anyone else innocent die.

He smiled upon seeing him, the gesture looking like it took a momentous amount of effort. "I was hoping you'd show up. You've got to get this power cell," he nodded to an orange metal box shaped thing beside him, "charged and back up to Dr Rosenberg. I'd help, but…" He clutched his eyes shut and looked like he would vomit for a moment before looking back up at him. "I'm hurt pretty bad."

"It's fine, it's fine. Just… keep quiet. Save your energy, huh?"

The guy didn't seem to hear him, almost talking to himself at this point. "You can probably push the power cell through the fence and into the charging station behind me. Let me see if… I can get out of the way."

And then he tried to get up. Barney did his best to stop him and just lift the guy himself, but the injured guard wasn't having any of it. Amazingly, he got to his feet.

"Ah… hell…"

The security guard fell, and Barney caught him. After lowering him down to the ground, Barney checked his pulse. Dead. He bowed his head and moved on to the power cell. It was surprisingly heavy, so he settled for simply pushing it through the fence door and into the charging machine. There was a little platform on the ground jutting out of an alcove at the bottom of the machine, the red light from inside casting a hellish glow onto Barney's blood soaked hands as he pushed the cell onto the platform.

There was only one button on the huge piece of machinery, so he pressed that with as much force as he could, more than a little anger powering the blow. The platform hissed as it moved the cell into the charging zone within the machine. With some loud humming noises and some flashing lights, the cell was charged up and deposited back out of the alcove by the platform. Again calling on his emotions to fuel him - because nothing else could at the moment - Barney managed to push the power cell to small slot of an elevator and pressed the red button beside it. With an affirmative ping, the platform within the slot started the journey up to Dr Rosenberg's lab, taking the power cell with it.

A few minutes later the machine pinged again, confirming that the lab people upstairs had received it. Barney sighed, his eyes on the dead security guard. He would have thought that after he had accomplished this he would feel better. Like it had been worth it.

Right now, he just felt nothing.

He walked slowly back to the elevator that would take him to Dr Rosenberg and got inside. It was a long, loud journey. He remembered how he had been worried about falling through the gap on the way down, making jokes to himself and trying to see the humour in order to get himself through the debacle. But, after everything that had happened, after knowing that he had shot and murdered his way through dozens of innocent aliens… he just felt tired. Not sad, not regretful.

Just tired. So very, very tired.

As of that moment, Barney Calhoun just wanted to go home.

(A/N: And there you go. Barney's journey is almost complete, folks. He's on the home stretch. Land ahoy. But don't be sad, because Shephard's on his way! And, as I said, he will kick ass.

Anyway, reviews please!

Next Chapter: Apprehension)

Apprehension

-1Disclaimer: I don't own *Half-Life*

(A/N: And hhgbh receives many thanks for wonderful beta work.)

The Black Mesa Incident

Chapter Sixteen: Apprehension

Gordon's eyes whipped open almost as soon as they had closed when the tram suddenly shuddered, making his entire body jolt from side to side. He got to his feet and joined both Philips and Bennett at the control panel. The tram was going faster and faster down the twisting corridors, and Gordon ascertained from the panicked looks of his companions that they couldn't slow down.

"You had to pick out a faulty tram, didn't you?" Bennett yelled at him.

Rather than continue an argument while their lives were in imminent danger, Gordon just shrugged instead of shooting back a response. Not that he would have done anyway. Gordon wasn't someone who really *had* arguments. It was probably a psychological condition; fear of confrontation, or something like that.

Little explosions peppered the black and yellow striped electrified rail beneath them, making the tram rock from side to side, going faster still as it turned another corner into an open expanse of a room.

Three soldiers were stood in front the large metal door that stood in lieu of a wall at the far end of the room. The rail itself stopped a few feet in front of them. Gordon ducked and gripped the guardrail just before Bennett shouted for them to hang on. The soldiers only just noticed their presence in time for the tram to smash its way off the rail and crush them into the door. The velocity of the tram carried it straight through, and Gordon barely had time to take in the new surroundings before they plummeted straight down.

It was a tank of some sort, the dark brown walls rusting and peeling. The whole room echoed around them as they fell, leading Gordon to come to the conclusion that they were in an enclosed space, if deep.

Suddenly they hit water and sank, continuing down for only a few seconds before the front of the tram hit the bottom with a metallic clank, the noise dulled by the water filling Gordon's ears. Slowly, the tram fell back until it was lying on the ground flat, as though it were sat on another rail, waiting for more passengers. Gordon opened his eyes in time to notices his glasses leaving his face, one temple having desperately grasped onto his ear before finally giving up the fight and floating away. He reached out and placed them back on his face, although they did little to clear his vision underwater.

He checked with Bennett and Philips, who both gave him 'OK' gestures with their hands. With a nod, he indicated upwards, and started swimming, hoping they would get the idea and follow. The water wasn't particularly dirty, but it wasn't particularly clean either. A he ascended, Gordon could make out walkways leading through open passageways to stairwell. The place must have been flooded somehow.

With a loud gasp, Gordon burst from the water, quickly followed by Bennett and Philips. Philips looked like he was having trouble keeping afloat because of his injured leg - Bennett had, unsurprisingly, lost his splint in the fall - and so Bennett and Gordon held on to him, keeping him above water level. . Their breathing echoed around the dark, cylindrical chamber they found themselves in, the ceiling towering above them and looking very intimidating.

"So," Bennett gasped, "where now?"

Gordon tilted his head downwards, indicating something underneath the water. "I saw some open doorways."

Philips nodded too, agreeing with him. "Yeah, I saw them."

"Okay then. Let's wait and catch our breath, and then we'll go, yeah?"

The two men agreed with murmured 'yes's. They waited in silence above the water, kicking idly before they finally decided they were ready and diving back underneath. Gordon led the charge, with Philips in the middle and Bennett at the back, in case their injured comrade would need any assistance. Strange caterpillar like creatures, a pale yellow bordering on white, writhed about in the water with them, latching onto his HEV suit every now and then before detaching, disinterested.

Gordon swam through the open doorway and up the stairs on his left, which turned up into more stairs going up the other way. Martha flapped about like a fish out of water, and Gordon shot the offending weapon a scowl. It didn't do much to stop it moving randomly every time he kicked. The water ended at the top of that stairway, and Gordon ended up walking out of the water like that woman from James Bond that he couldn't quite remember. Barney would probably be able to recite the actresses' name from memory, along with which film it was and when said movie came out.

The corridor was predominantly a sickly yellow, the concrete floor below him a dull pale grey. He turned and helped Philips limp up the wet metal stairs when he emerged. They waited for Bennett to come out before continuing on, dripping water as they went. The corridor turned left at the end, and they came out into a much larger room filled with water. A brown metal walkway under their feet ran along the left hand side of the room, leading to an entrance in the wall. The walkway looked a little worse for wear and very precarious. Barnacle creatures hung their tongues from the ceiling all around the walkway, as if they knew that was the only way people could get around the room. Hanging above the centre of the water was a shark cage, dangling from a metal post that extended out of a room above them.

Suddenly, the water in front of them erupted upwards. A scientist launched up out of water several feet into the air, screaming. Blood whipped around from his dismembered leg before he began to fall

back into the water again. Something big and red shot upwards out of the water, catching the scientist in its mouth and swallowing him whole before disappearing under the water again.

A low, continuous drone echoed from underneath the water, and occasionally, the top fin of the fish like monster appeared from underneath the water.

Bennett looked at Gordon. "I'm taking bets that the only way out is under the water."

Gordon didn't reply, his gaze firmly on the water beneath them. Those weren't really odds he could argue with. They walked around the walkway, the occasional long, rope like barnacle tongue blocking their path. On those occasions, Gordon would pull out Martha and shoot the barnacles above them to death before continuing on and leaving Bennett and Philips to catch up.

Eventually they got to the far left corner of the room and walked around the corner into the corridor. After some wandering around some more corners, they came to a wide ladder. They clambered up and into a fairly utilitarian looking lab. The walls in front of them and on their left were completely replaced by control panels, flashing lights, beeping noises and monitor screens filled with green numbers giving the impression of a lot going on in a small space. A scientist with her mousy hair tied back in a bun stood idly in the corner, as though waiting for them. She looked at Gordon with any surprise in her features, just wonder.

"Did you see it? They said it was hauled from the Challenger Deep-"

"Hey, I've been there!" Philips piped in, prompting both Gordon and Bennett to give him a confused and annoyed look.

The new addition to their troupe didn't seem to mind. "But I'm positive that beast didn't swim in terrestrial waters until a week ago." She swallowed loudly, avoiding Gordon's gaze, who towered over her by a head and a half. He had never felt particularly tall until that

moment. "There's a tranquilizer gun in the shark cage," she continued, nodding across the room, "but I'm not sure if it will work on *this* species. You're welcome to try."

Gordon looked down the long room and saw a gap in the wall. After giving the scientist a cautious look, he walked over to it. Extending out of the tall, thin gap was the metal post that the shark cage hung from. He looked cautiously around the post and managed to catch a glimpse of something that resembled a crossbow inside the cage. How the hell did that get in there without someone being trapped in their with it? Honestly, sometimes it was as though someone was making these tasks difficult deliberately.

Tired and rubbing his eyes beneath his glasses, Gordon looked back across the room to the scientist. "I don't suppose there's another one?"

She tilted her head to the side curiously. "Why would there be another one?"

He sighed, closing his eyes "Of course. Sorry." He tossed Martha to the floor.

Before he turned around and started the tightrope walk along the metal post, he could have sworn he saw a smirk on Bennett' face. It was that smirk that powered his resolve to get that crossbow and kill the big alien killer fish below. Gordon was fairly sure this was the strangest task he had ever set himself.

There was only one bar on the top of the cage, splitting the top down the middle. This bar was also all that the chain it hung from was attached to, making Gordon even more apprehensive about simply dropping in. And even if he got inside without dislodging the cage, the water was so murky he doubted he would be able to get any kind of lock on the creature. His aim wasn't that good to begin with, despite Harv from the office complex claiming that he was a 'natural'.

He reached the end of the post and lowered himself down. The crossbow itself was lying on a thin brown metal shelf a metre or so above the 'floor' of the cage, which was itself only about four bars. It was this shelf, that Gordon fell onto after his grip slipped on the post, knocking the crossbow out and dangling precariously through the middle two bars of the bottom of the cage. From his awkward upside down position on the shelf, Gordon stretched out his arm to pick up the crossbow. A loud creaking noise from the chain above him gave him reason to pause. He looked up just as it snapped, sending the cage crashing into the water and straight to the bottom, the crossbow lost from Gordon's vision in the face of the water rushing into his eyes.

The cage clanked dully on the concrete floor at the bottom. Gordon wasn't sure if this place was supposed to be underwater or not. After all, on the other side of the room was a huge metal door made out of the same material as the shark cage with a crank wheel beside it, so obviously people came down here and travelled back and forth.

His attention quickly fell to the giant red fish creature charging at him through the water, its growl evident even through the dulling effect of the water. It slammed into the cage, making it lean precariously before falling back on the ground again. Gordon had since managed to come to an upright position, and was searching for the crossbow. His eyes found it wedged beneath the cage. It was a wonder it hadn't been crushed. When he tried to pull out from underneath, he realised that it was well beyond his strength levels, and he was losing air faster than he would be able to think of some way to move the cage.

The fish creature slammed into the cage again, this time even harder than before. The cage almost toppled this time, but it allowed Gordon to free the crossbow from underneath the cage and slip it sideways between the bars. He pulled back the wire behind the dart in the delivery system on the top until it was on the metal hook at the rear of the crossbow. He took aim and fired it directly between the creatures' eyes, which, like any fish, faced off in opposite directions. The monster growled louder and seemed to go drowsy for a moment

before shaking off the effects of the tranquiliser and swimming away, preparing for another charge.

Pressure built in Gordon's lungs. He desperately needed air, now. His hands fumbling from his haste, he pulled back the wire again, the next dart in the brace loaded into the crossbow coming up as he did so. The creature was almost upon him now. He fired again, this time hitting it in the right eye. It recoiled in pain, yellow blood puffing out into the water as it writhed away. Gordon could feel himself fading away, so he quickly pulled the next dart into position, took aim, and fired.

That finally did it. The creature writhed some more after the dart hit it in its side, but then it suddenly fell limp, the eyes closing and the body floating up to the surface like a dead goldfish. Gordon didn't even have time to feel relief as he dropped the crossbow and kicked up with his legs, negotiating his way through the gap in the top of the cage and bursting up to the surface. He took the deepest, longest, loudest breath he had even taken in his life, and he heard the distinct noise of applause coming from up above him. In the lab above, Bennett and Philips clapped and whooped, giving the occasional thumbs up.

If he feeling a little less glad to simply be alive, Gordon would have bowed illustriously once he was out of the water. He pointed to the murky liquid below him as he sat on the brown metal walkway.

"There's a way out down there."

Bennett nodded, smiling. "We'll be right down."

Gordon heard Bennett and the scientist exchanging a few words, Philips occasionally piping in now and then. She was probably trying to convince the scientist to come with them, but if Gordon knew any member of staff in Black Mesa that wasn't in security, he knew that the answer would be an unequivocal 'no'. Very few scientists would have the guts (not to mention common sense, really) to say yes. Eli Vance was one of them. Isaac Kleiner another. He knew of scientists

like Dr Rosenberg and Richard Keller who had reputations, but he didn't know either of them well enough to judge what their response to the current… predicament was.

And, of course, there was him. Gordon had no idea how he would be reacting right now if he *hadn't* been the one in the test chamber that morning. Maybe he would be insisting on waiting for the military or simply hiding like most of his peers did. But he hoped not.

There was silence for a few seconds, and within a few minutes Philips and Bennett sat down beside him on the walkway, sans their temporary scientific guide. Bennett sat on his right, Philips on his left, also dropping off Martha - crowbar attached - on Gordon's lap.

"She hadn't heard about the military," Philips explained, although it sounded like he was defending her to Bennett as much as he was telling Gordon the facts.

"But we told her, and she still decided to stay."

"That's her choice."

"And it's *our duty* to protect her. How can we just leave her here in good conscience?"

"So you think we should stay here with her?"

"No, I'm saying that *one* of us should stay here and make sure she's safe until the *real* rescue parties arrive."

"What real rescue parties? The government? They sent the military in on us in the first place. You really think they're going to change their minds because some lucky-ass survivors come to their doorstep? They're more likely to kill us or contain us on the spot. Hell, with the technology they've got now, they could probably wipe our brains of the whole thing."

"No," Bennett replied quietly, shaking her head.

"No?"

"No." She looked past Gordon and at Philips, who was sat on the other side of him. "Once they find out what's going on down here, they'll send help. *Real* help. This is the work of people doing what's in the country's 'best interests'. This *isn't* the work of the people we elected into power. Once those people find out, all the people here will be okay."

"So we can leave her! What's the problem?" Philips yelled, gesturing angrily up to the room the scientist occupied. Gordon wondered if she could hear their debate.

"The problem is that there's no guarantee the soldiers won't reach her first."

"Soldiers that the government sent."

"The government didn't do this!"

"How can you be sure, huh?"

"Because I have to be! If I don't, that means that my dad is dead for no reason. It means that my best friend got her head ripped off by some alien squid thing for no reason. All right? Is that okay with you?"

Philips was silent, and Gordon stared at the tips of his boots through the shimmering surface of the water. It was strange how they looked bigger under the water.

"I…"

"Yes?"

"… sorry."

Bennett closed her eyes and sighed.

"I didn't know," Philips continued on, fumbling for some kind of decent apology.

"It's fine."

"Are you sure? I mean, obviously about your friend, but what about-"

"He worked with Dr Rosenberg, who worked on teleportation tech. If that doesn't mean the military would kill him straight away, I don't know what does."

"Well… other scientists survived. Why not him?"

"Because if he *is* alive…" Her voice caught in her throat. "It means I'm abandoning him here."

Silence descended between them, the only noise the light slapping of the water against the walls beneath the walkways.

Bennett looked to Gordon. "What about you, Gordon? What do you think we should do about her?"

He stared off at the metal doorway, seeing the tantalising corridor beyond through the bars. He wrapped Martha's strap across on shoulder like a postman.

"I think… that we'll need two people to turn the crank."

With that, he ejected himself from the walkway and into the water, sinking like a torpedo before swimming down towards the ground where the crank was embedded into the wall. He grabbed it and pulled, using it to swing his body around. As he turned, he saw Bennett and Philips swimming down towards him, the latter considerably slower than the former. Philips got a firm grasp on the wheel along with Gordon, and they started to turn it to the right, both somehow instinctively feeling that was the right way to turn it.

Gordon had been right about the crank, much to his surprise. He had just said what he did as an excuse to get them to stop fighting. After

all, if they were chasing after him trying to keep him alive, they wouldn't be agonising about moral decisions that were ultimately out of their control. Bubbles frothed from his mouth with every big turn as he grunted from the effort. Eventually, the metal door was up high enough for someone a good head taller than Gordon to walk through.

The door slowly descended as soon as they let go of the wheel. Bennett swam through first, and Gordon pushed Philips through before him, grabbing him by the belt to help him along. Gordon felt the metal narrowly miss his toes as he swam through. The underwater corridor went immediately to the right, the ground going up in a ramp. They quickly found themselves out of the water, Bennett shaking her head and rubbing her hand through her hair in a vain attempt to get it somewhat dryer. It didn't really work, so with a grumble, she just plopped her helmet back on her head.

Following the corridor around several twists and turns, they found themselves in an open expanse of a room with five huge industrial pistons lined up in a row. A control panel on a platform above them switched them on, and his two companions waited on the ground floor while he went up and turned them on.

When up on the platform overlooking the room, Gordon saw movement on the opposite side of the room, on a walkway that ran along the wall.

It was him. Again. That man in the suit. With a quick straighten of his tie, the man turned and strolled leisurely down the walkway before disappearing into an open doorway in the far right hand corner of the room. The noise of the pistons working almost faded away as Gordon followed him intently the whole time. His jaw clenched, Gordon sprinted downstairs and almost fell over as he tried to come to a stop in front of Bennett and Philips, who had since sat against a wall while they waited for him.

"Whoa! Where's the fire?"

Gordon pointed to the walkway on the opposite side of the room. "Did you see…?"

Bennett looked over. "Oh. Doorway, okay. Looks like there's a ladder up to the walkway, too."

"Great," Philips grumbled. "More ladders."

"C'mon, buddy. Up and at 'em," she grunted, getting to her feet and helping him to his. They started walking, leaving Gordon stood watching them.

"But…"

"You coming, Gordon?"

Incredibly frustrated, Gordon scowled and followed wordlessly, silently overtaking them, rushing up the ladder and down the walkway. Through the doorway was yet another corridor, and Gordon held no doubt that no matter how fast he ran, he would never find his quarry. He was quickly starting to hate men in tailored suits.

Looking a little irritated, Bennett and Philips caught up with him. They didn't say anything, for which he was grateful, but they were clearly displeased with his strange behaviour. The only apology or explanation he could offer was a shrug and a murmured 'sorry' before leading the way.

The pale yellow of the corridors gradually gave way to a cold blue. Steam puffed out of Gordon's mouth with every exhalation, and he looked back to Bennett and Philips. He was taking a breath to ask if it was cold when the two spoke in unison, and very loudly.

"Yes."

Another advantage of the HEV suit. Gordon could barely feel it except on his ears. It was the kind of cold that made one sniff and stung the earlobes. Not pleasant, but not unpleasant either. But then

again, this was coming from the point of view of someone in a protective hazard suit. His companions had no such protection, and looked uncomfortable.

They turned a right corner, and the floor inclined upwards towards a lab. A familiar gurgle echoed down, and Gordon pulled Martha from his shoulder, taking point. He reached the top of the corridor and, with his back pressed to the wall, peeked around the corner. An electricity alien stood in front of him, looking alarmed by his sudden arrival. It quickly recovered and pressed its hands together, gathering green electricity.

Swinging around the corner, Gordon cocked Martha and fired at the creature's chest, the spray tearing through the brown flesh and knocking the alien on its back. Yellow blood pooled below it.

He looked around the room. Two tall control panels stood parallel to each other and running down about a third of the room, directly in the middle, creating two little corridors; one between the two control panels, and one between the right hand side control panel and the wall. The room opened up on his left, another control panel full of blinking lights and beeping noises making up the wall. A bare table with a metallic sheen lay in front of it. Taking up the far left corner of the room was a smaller room, the walls made of white clouded glass. He thought he could make out a human figure inside, and his heart jumped. It was him in there. The man in the suit. A door was on the right hand face of the room. When he heard Bennett and Philips coming up behind him, he put up a hand to signal them to stop, and they did so.

Gordon explored further into the room, and blasted through two more aliens before he was satisfied the room was safe. The person inside the misted room moved across to the wall. The door opened with a hiss, and Gordon rushed to the door, vaguely aware of Bennett and Philips coming up beside him. His heart sank with Martha as a hopeful, eager looking scientist was revealed by the sliding door. Warm air floated in from inside the room, and the two security guards rushed inside, savouring the feeling with grateful smiles. The

scraggly, white haired scientist was totally focused on the disenchanted Gordon, however.

"Gordon Freeman, it is you, isn't it?" He shivered, and welcomed Gordon inside the room. He went in and enjoyed the feeling of the warm recycled air around his head. The room was very small, feeling more like an airlock than a room. A secure looking door on the far side of the room confirmed this assumption, and Gordon got a bad feeling about what was coming.

The scientist pressed a button on the small panel in front of him, and the door slid shut behind them, closing out the cold once and for all. "The science team have been tracking your progress with the Black Mesa security system. Unfortunately, so has the military. That suit of yours is full of tracking devices."

Gordon looked down at his suit, as though he could somehow be able to see them and remove them. It was a disconcerting feeling to know that almost everyone in the facility knew where he was.

His new information source shrugged and nodded to the secure door, walking over to the control panel on the wall next to it. "Still, it's better than going naked in this place. It's cold in there, and you'll have to hurry. It could sap your suit power in a matter of moments."

Philips piped up from where he sat against the glass. "So… we can't go?" His tone was halfway between regret and hopefulness. Bennett had no discernable expression one way or the other.

The scientist looked aghast at the suggestion. "By heavens, no. You'd both die within seconds."

"… how many seconds?"

Bennett punched him in the arm before getting up and hugging Gordon. She pulled away and looked up at him. "It's been fun, Gordon."

"I… suppose."

"Remember we're down here, all right?"

The choice of words brought back memories of another security guard Gordon had made a promise to.

" *Don't forget we're down here, all right?"*

All Gordon had been able to give by way of response was a nod. This time, he tried to give a reassuring smile.

"I'll be back for you." His gaze travelled down to Philips. "I promise."

The young man smiled, getting to his feet and hobbling over to him. He shook Gordon's hand.

"Thanks for… well, thanks for everything."

Gordon gave his hand another shake for good measure and turned to the door. He looked over at the scientist and gave an affirmative nod.

Returning the gesture, the scientist turned to the control panel. With his finger poised over the relevant button, he paused, turning back to Gordon again. "If you're bent on reaching the Lambda Complex, you'll want to keep to the older industrial areas where the security system is full of holes. It's worked for me." He thought for a moment. "So far."

He took a deep breath and nodded. "Thank you."

Apparently satisfied, the scientist pressed the button, sliding open the door with a loud clang. As soon as a big enough gap was available, Gordon launched into a sprint into the dimly lit room, the cold immediately making his glasses frost up. He whipped them from his face and kept on running, hoping to God that he would be able to find his way through without them.

He could make out blurry large objects on either side that resembled giant towering cylinders, creating a makeshift corridor for him to run down. His feet slipped beneath him, threatening to make him fall flat on his face and end his journey right here. By some miracle, he managed to stay upright. A brown smudge appeared at the end of the corridor, and Gordon realised as he slid straight into it that it was an electricity alien. It collided into the wall behind it, either knocking it out or disorienting it enough for him to get away. Not wanting to look a gift horse in the mouth (not that he could with the way his vision was at the moment), Gordon followed the corridor around again, finally coming across a square hole in the ground with a ladder poking out of the top, curving up and around, attaching itself into the ground.

He slid along the icy floor almost fell down the hole, only just managing to grab a rung. On the verge of hyperventilating, Gordon lowered himself down the ladder as quickly as he could, eventually landing feet first on a latticework metal floor. He fell onto his back and put down his glasses to rub his face with his hands. Rubbing furiously, he managed to return some warmth to his cheeks and ears.

His breath robbed from him by the blind running and the deathly cold, Gordon sat up on the spot and slipped his glasses on. He frowned as he found them still frosted over so he breathed hot air on them a few times to clear them up before he got up.

He was on a platform overlooking an area that led straight into a corridor ahead of him. A ladder led down to the ground floor, and he took it, hopping off a few rungs up. Martha at the ready, Gordon walked down the corridor, his attention brought to crates and barrels littered along either side of the room, providing cover for any potential enemies that might want to attack him. The warm golden tones of the lights and walls made Gordon feel warmer, though. He decided that was a good thing.

The corridor turned to the left fairly soon, and this corridor stretched on for quite a long time. Some of his caution fading, Gordon

continued on at a slightly brisker pace until he came across a military crate. Suddenly wary of soldiers, Gordon unwrapped the crowbar and used it to pull the crate open, revealing some rectangular shaped boxes with little circular indentations in the centre. A lens was inside the indentation, and Gordon realised that they were the laser mines that had haunted him in almost every place he had encountered military resistance.

He took two with him, slinging Martha over his shoulder. Eventually, he reached the end of the corridor. There was an indentation in the wall on his right, made for the wide freight elevator that sat in place, waiting for any passengers. Gordon stepped on and found the simple 'red button/green button' control panel to make it ascend up to the second floor, which he could see from where he was stood.

What he recognised as the boots of a security guard came into view, and Gordon felt a little bit of relief. Although he had become accustomed to doing things by himself today, all the help he had gotten along the way had done something to ease the burden. The security guard was stood in a hallway that led into an open space behind him, looking like a warehouse. The whole place looked like it was seemingly lined with supply crates, large and small. In the middle of the warehouse, Gordon could make out a rather large square platform a good few feet above the ground, metal ramps leading up there. Even higher above that, in lieu of a roof, the bright blue sky of an early morning could be soon, and Gordon suddenly felt both happy and tired.

The elevator came to a clanking halt. The security guard smiled and nodded upon seeing him.

"Freeman, right? I've got a message for you. Make sure you don't-"

His throat burst open from behind, a violent spatter of blood shooting forward. The guard instantly fell face first to the ground, blood pooling in front of him.

There was a huge stack of green metal military crates on Gordon's left. He tossed the laser mines behind them and pulled Martha from his shoulder, cocking her and feeling very small sense of security from the power behind the action.

Everything was silent, the only noise the sounds of the fans on the ceilings doing their work.

Then, a quiet tapping noise echoed around the hall. Suddenly, a slim, pitch black figure darted around the corner. A high pitched noise - which Gordon somehow instantly knew was a silencer - popped through the air, accompanied by the flash of the attacker's handheld pistol. The small, fast, and powerful bullets hit Gordon in the stomach, then the shoulder, knocking him on his back. He swung Martha up and fired, but the impossibly fast attacker dodged back out of sight.

He breathed rapidly as he got up, surprised at how easily he ran out of breath. Within a few seconds, the foot steps were back, growing louder and louder. Gordon ducked behind the green crates along with the laser mines, cocking Martha and pointing her where he guessed the black clad assassin would pop up.

The lithe dark figure appeared in front of him, and he fired, eviscerating his enemies' insides and spraying them against the wall. The figure clutched at his stomach before collapsing dead to the ground. As Gordon looked down at the dead body he realised from the shape of the figure that it was a woman.

Before he could completely process this, he heard more footsteps. He cocked Martha, but nothing happened. No satisfying clicking noises, no cartridge popping out the side, nothing. He tried again, and quickly decided in a panic that he had run out of ammunition. He tossed the gun to the ground in frustration and looked around. The footsteps paused for a moment before starting up again.

His gloved hand fell onto one of the laser mines, and with a smile he attached the magnetic side to the side of the crate the assassin

would have to run past to reach him. Once attached, it whined affirmatively, a blue laser emitting from the lens and touching the wall opposite. Gordon pressed himself into a corner and waited as the footsteps got closer.

The assassin leapt straight over the laser, going into a roll and bringing her weapon to bear at Gordon. He barely managed to get his arms in front of his face before he was barraged by tiny, powerful bullets. Then, as quickly as they had started, they stopped. Gordon looked up and the assassin was gone. He checked his stats. HEV at 56, health at 69.

What a fun day this was.

With his jaw set, Gordon scooped up the other laser and placed it at the bottom of the crate, pointing diagonally up. The blue laser from this mine crossed over the laser of the straightforward one. Again, Gordon waited. Again, the footsteps approached. And again, the assassin managed to leap clean over his trap and hit him with even more bullets, lowering his suit power precariously further.

Gordon was beginning to understand what Barney meant when he said 'Okay, now I'm pissed'.

He grabbed Martha and unwrapped the crowbar, this time waiting just next to the corner of the metal crate. The footsteps approached again. Gordon had a pretty good idea by now of just how loud the footsteps had to be just before the assassin made her jump over the lasers. With that in mind, Gordon listened.

The footsteps grew louder, and Gordon's one handed grip on the crowbar tightened.

Louder still. He adjusted his position.

Then the briefest of pauses as the assassin jumped. Gordon swung the crowbar around, the pointed end stabbing into the assassin's face, causing a most un-assassin-like scream to emerge. The body

fell straight to the ground, going through both blue lasers. Abandoning the crowbar which had become lodged in his opponent's face, Gordon leapt away in time for the explosion to force him side first into the wall in front of him. He slumped to the ground with a groan.

After taking a moment or two to catch his breath and adjust his askew glasses, Gordon struggled to his feet, running his flat palms against the wall behind him to support his weight. Slowly, and with one hand rubbing the side of his head, Gordon picked up the spent Martha and slung her over his shoulder. He hoped those were the last of those assassin things in the room. He wasn't sure how he would be able to take out any more of them.

A cursory glance down at his stats only reinforced this, putting the HEV at 32 and his own health at 49. For once he agreed with his suit's assessment. He felt like he was at 49. Glass half empty kind of feeling. Without much effort, he managed to pry the crowbar from the charred remains of the assassin, trying to put the sound of her pained scream out of his mind as he continued on into the warehouse.

It was strange. The fact that his attackers were women hadn't deterred him as far as his survival instincts went. When you're facing a loaded gun, Gordon guessed that your reaction was the same, no matter who was holding it. Either way, the other person is trying to kill you.

The crowbar dangled idly from his hand as he wandered around, eventually coming to a sign that read 'SURFACE ACCESS'. That sounded like something he wanted, so he looked to what was next to it. A huge square doorway stood in front of him, large enough to get a truck into, at least. A metal roll down cover was in place, and a quick look further down to the left confirmed another entrance similarly covered up.

At a lack of anything else to do, Gordon went up to the upper platform. There, he found a lever in the floor pointed off to the left, a

sign identical to the one beside the big doors below above it. Wrapping the crowbar around Martha once again, Gordon wrapped his hands around the handle of the lever, the finger shaped grooves there helping. With a grunt, he managed to pull it all the way to the other side, and the doors went up with it.

Satisfied, Gordon went down and through the large open doorways, finding himself in what he presumed, with the other entrance off to the left, was a U shaped corridor. Hopefully there would be a door somewhere around. His hopes were answered as he turned the corner, where, at the bottom of the 'U' shape was an open door, a HEV charging station planted enticingly on the wall.

Gordon went inside. It was only then that he started to think about the security guard's words before he was killed.

" *Make sure you don't-"*

Don't what?

The door closed behind him, and the lights went out.

"Get him!"

He felt something cold and hard hit him in the back of his head, and he fell to the ground. Someone chuckled behind him.

"Nice hit." Then it sounded like he was talking into his radio. "All right, we got him."

Then Gordon was engulfed by a completely different kind of blackness.

At first, it felt like rest. Like he was finally getting a chance to sleep. Slowly, he opened his eyes, still feeling very drowsy and wondering why he was walking backwards. Then he realised he wasn't walking, he was being dragged. Strange that he couldn't feel it though. He was in a dull, grey corridor, the lights hurting his eyes.

"Where're we taking this Freeman guy?"

Gordon looked over and saw a gasmask wearing soldier on his left, holding his arm roughly.

"Topside for questioning." That came from the beret soldier dragging his other arm.

"What the hell for? We got him, let's kill him now!"

"Uh… and if they find the body?"

"Body? What body?"

Gordon couldn't think about the meaning of their words. It was hard to think in general. They passed a small latticework vent on the left, and Gordon could have sworn he saw Barney looking through at him. Barney? Why was he there? He looked desperate, too. Like he wanted to help but some invisible wall in front of him was putting a halt to his efforts.

The soldiers either side of him laughed, and Gordon's eyes closed of their own volition, plunging him into darkness once again.

The next time he woke up, it was nowhere near as peaceful. He landed violently on something very solid, some small light objects accompanying him. A piece of paper floated down until it covered his face, and Gordon opened his eyes, instinctively swiping it away.

Where the hell was he?

And had he really just seen Barney?

The room he was in was incredibly narrow. Crates, tables and boxes were piled up on his right, squashing him into the cool metal black wall on his left. There was another black wall on the other side of the room, which wasn't very far. The boxes and everything else looked like they had just been thrown in from on high. Gordon looked up, realising something. Sunlight was filtering in through the latticework

metal ceiling, leaving a crisscross of shadows across the whole room. The sun! Gordon hadn't seen the sun in… well, it felt like an age.

His glasses were still on his face, although why the military had been considerate enough to leave them on, Gordon had no idea. Actually - and perhaps more importantly - Gordon had no idea why they had been considerate enough to let him live when he was fairly sure he heard them agree to kill him.

But then he thought about it. Their actual words involved nobody being able to find the body. Which would suggest they were going to-

A metallic groan interrupted his musings. And then Gordon realised where he was. The black steel walls began closing in. He was in a trash compactor. Gordon looked up. The top of the black 'walls' didn't touch the latticework ceiling. Above his head he could see a hatch which he presumed workers would open and toss garbage down through.

Or people, if you were the military and had a sadistic streak in you.

There was no way he could reach it, though. Something metal glinted beneath some sheets of paper at his feet. After a brief spate of digging, Gordon brought up his crowbar, the red peeling paint unmistakable. He would have taken some solace in finding his old travelling companion if the walls hadn't pressed his body towards the haphazard mountain or crates and tables beside him. Left with little option, Gordon climbed, barely managing to balance on the makeshift climbing frame.

He continued up, and realised to his incredible relief that the top box - upon which he was now precariously perched) would allow him to jump clean over the black 'wall' and down to the ground on the other side. Hopefully there would be some way out of here. From what he could see, while the black 'walls' were thick they didn't take up that much space behind them, that left to the metal pistons behind them that pushed them into the garbage. As the box beneath him toppled,

Gordon thrust forward, overshooting the 'wall' completely and landing on the ground on the other side with a very painful and sharp thud.

A pained gasp escaped his lips, but he froze when he saw something in the ground; a grate. A wonderful, fantastic, superb grate, down through which he could see a very dark pipe. Almost completely black pipe. But he didn't care. He took the crowbar and shoved it between the bars of the grate, popping it up and sliding inside before the 'walls' had even stopped compressing.

It wasn't as big a drop as he had feared, but the metal floor of the one-person-sized pipe was incredibly slippery, and Gordon almost instantly fell on his rear. Even though the pipe wasn't on an incline, somehow the impact of Gordon's falling over combined with the slippery nature of the pipe managed to propel him down it at disconcerting speeds. It took him towards the light at the end of the tunnel, however, so Gordon tried to put his annoyance on the backseat.

The light blinded him as he was launched out of the pipe and into the open air. Gordon could smell sewage.

Whatever had made Barney look so desperate - if it had even been Barney in the first place - Gordon was sure it wasn't as bad as this. Because, in terms that the security guard would no doubt use, nothing really compared to swimming in shit.

(A/N: As I wrote this chapter, I started wondering; is it actually possible to swim properly with glasses on? I don't wear them myself, so… any glasses wearing readers have an input on the matter?

Well, anyway… reviews, please!

Next Chapter: A Leap of Faith)

A Leap of Faith

-1Disclaimer: I don't own *Half-Life.*

(A/N: Many inadequate thanks to hhgbh for beta work!)

The Black Mesa Incident

Chapter Seventeen: A Leap of Faith

Doctor Rosenberg was waiting for him at the top. The elevator didn't clang to a halt as it reached the top; it just sort of slowed until it was relatively still, still rocking from side to side as Barney stepped out. Rosenberg was smiling from ear to ear and put a hand on Barney's shoulder as they walked out into the hallway.

"Calhoun, you did it! We've already started setting up the device with the fresh power cell you sent up."

Bennett and Simmons were knelt in front of a complicated piece of machinery built into the wall on the left, which Barney guessed was connected to the teleporter in the room behind said wall. Both scientists looked up at him and gave him a nod and a smile, looking upon him as their own personal saviour.

The enthusiasm of his colleagues started to make him feel somewhat better in himself. The thought that he would soon be looking at the clear blue New Mexico sky helped, too. Hot dogs, beer, TV… actually, things were starting to look a whole lot better now that they were on their way home. As he started paying attention to where he was going, he realised that Rosenberg was leading him to the teleporter room, the secure doors already open.

"This time, however, the process is going to be a little more complex, so I'm going to need your help."

That just made Barney feel nervous.

"Uh… doc, I'm not really a science kinda guy… I mean I don't even know the basics like… how to calculate power and stuff."

"Power equals work over time," the scientist responded without pause, walking past the teleportation machinery and two a keyboard sticking out of a wall on the far side of the room.

A tight smile crossed his face, and Barney rubbed an eyebrow absently with his finger. "Well, thanks doc, but that's not really what I *meant…"*

Rosenberg, however, was somewhere else entirely, at least in his own head. He tapped furiously on the keyboard before nodding in satisfaction at something. There wasn't even a monitor in front of him, so how he knew what the results of his tapping were, Barney didn't know.

"All right." He looked at Barney over his shoulder. "I'll stay down here to monitor the system levels and engage the procedure. I need you-" he pointed to Barney, "-to climb up to the control room-" he gestured to a room on the upper floor that overlooked the teleportation array, "-and activate the main power."

That said, he wandered over to the yellow booth with the glass protection windows on it. Barney followed him hands on his hips in an irritated manner. Rosenberg didn't seem to notice, instead focusing on the myriad array of buttons and controls around him.

"Once the process has started you'll have to release the damping locks each time the system has charged in order to open the displacement field." It was then, finally, that he looked up at Barney and saw the look of simultaneous horror and anger. He smiled reassuringly, and spoke with a tone that actually went some way to calming Barney's frayed nerves.

"Don't worry, Mr Calhoun. The process *is* simple, and I'll let you know when you need to do something."

The security guard studied his companion of pretty much the entire day, running his tongue contemplatively along the front of his lower teeth behind his bottom lip. Finally, he nodded. "Okay, okay. Where do I go?"

Rosenberg pointed to a ladder that was on the opposite side of the room from the entrance doors of the lab. It led up to a walkway that ran along the width of the room and ended in the control room currently above Barney's head. It was the same control room Simmons had been inside before Barney's earlier journey to the alien world.

Thinking of the alien world invariably brought thoughts of innocent dying aliens to mind, so Barney jogged over to the ladder and occupied himself with climbing up the ladder to the walkway and concentrating on everything Rosenberg told him. Barney clambered up onto the latticework metal walkway, his eyes drawn to all the dials and controls on the right wall as he walked along to the control room. At the end of the walkway on his right was a metal secure looking door that for all intents and purposes was locked.

On his left was a drop down to what Barney deduced was the control room. A red ladder led down into the room, but Barney bypassed it since the drop wasn't that severe. He landed with a thud and walked into the small room. On the right hand side of the room was a big brown switch with 'MAIN POWER' written above it. Barney pulled it down, and the teleporter thrummed to life. Rosenberg's voice echoed from down below, and Barney walked to the front of the room, where an opening in the wall - made safe by guardrails running along the top and bottom - overlooked the teleportation machinery. A control panel with the words 'DISP. FIELD DAMPING LOCKS' written on a green plate with white letter stood in front of him, a big red button to the right of it.

Down below him in the lab on the lower right was doctor Rosenberg, stood working away behind his L shaped yellow booth of a control panel.

"Very good," he said quietly, and Barney almost didn't hear him over the rising noise of the teleporter. Rosenberg's voice rose. "Standby, Calhoun! Once the system is initialised it will take a few moments for the interpolating resonance coils to achieve focus!"

"Yeah, those things are a bitch!" he yelled back.

"I'm sorry?"

"I said 'yeah'!"

Rosenberg just smiled and nodded, although he probably had little idea what Barney was talking about. He looked down at a small monitor in front of him and nodded excitedly.

"The main capacitors are charging. When the main charge meter reaches full," he pointed to five stacked rectangular lights on the wall beside the teleportation platform, "I'll need you to open the displacement field!"

He looked up at Barney with a hopeful look, and Barney gave him a thumbs up. Even his science-fearing mind could understand the idea of pushing the big red button to save the day. The charge meter - which really seemed a fancy name for some lights - was lit up to number four.

"We're almost there…" Rosenberg announced, working feverishly on the control panel. Movement caught his eye, and Barney saw Bennett and Simmons walk into the lab, looking slightly fearful of the teleporter. Bennett stepped forward first as the meter reached full.

"The system is fully charged! Throw the switch, Calhoun!"

With relish, Barney slammed his fist on the now lit red button. The teleporter made a noise as though it were sucking all other sound from the room. The very center of the platform seemed to pull in little darts of light. Then, suddenly, a flash blinded Barney. When he

opened his eyes, a green orb of teleportation energy stood floated in the middle of the platform, waiting for a passenger.

Rosenberg nodded and yelled to his colleague, who stood petrified in front of the glowing orb. "There! Go now, Walter!"

After a little shove from Simmons, Bennett squeezed his eyes shut and ran head on into the teleporter energy. It disappeared with a flash as soon as he ran into it, taking him with it. Barney felt pretty amazed, despite the fact he had already ridden that particular rollercoaster. It was still a pretty astounding thing to witness. The voice of Rosenberg echoing from down below brought him back to reality.

"Very good, Calhoun. I'll start charging the system for the next teleport event."

Again, the lights on the wall started lighting up, and Barney's excitement grew. This was really happening. They were really getting out of here.

"Almost there…" Rosenberg said. Barney could hear his voice trembling even over the noise of the teleporter.

Before he knew it, the meter had reached the top, and Rosenberg was once again shouting up to him.

"There, we've reached full charge again. Open the field, Calhoun!"

The same process again. Sound and lines of light being pulled into the teleporter, a flash of light, and then the teleportation orb.

"You must go now, Simmons!" The scientist ran inside at the same time as Rosenberg spoke, obviously needing no such encouragement. As before, the orb of light disappeared upon contact with its passenger, taking him with it.

Suddenly Barney realised something. What the hell were he and Rosenberg going to do? Didn't this thing need two people? Rosenberg started speaking again as the charging meter began to fill up.

"I'm going to go next-" Barney's heart skipped a beat "-but don't worry, Mr Calhoun. I've set up the system to automatically start the charging sequence once I've made it through! Just wait for the levels to reach full again and open the field like you've been doing!"

Although that sounded simple enough, Barney couldn't help but feel nervous. All alone in here with this machinery? By himself? What if something exploded? What if something malfunctioned and he had to find his way out of here? More fighting, more surviving, more corpses, more blood… he wasn't sure if he could do any more of that stuff today.

"It's ready!"

Barney's head whipped up and he instinctively slammed his hand down on the button in front of him. After the normal effects, the orb appeared and Rosenberg dashed around the control panel, running straight for the orb. He paused and turned, looking up at Barney.

"Good luck, Mr Calhoun! I'll see you on the other side!"

With that, he turned and went into the orb.

And Barney Calhoun was alone in Black Mesa Facility once again. The meter started charging. A clanging noise assaulted his ears, and for a brief terrifying moment, Barney thought the teleporter had malfunctioned. But then he realised… it sounded more like someone slamming into something solid, something metal, something…

His eyes widened and he ran to the ladder, clambering up to look at the secure metal door. Sparks flew from the lower left corner and slowly started to travel up. The military. The military were here with

blowtorches and they were breaking in. He ran back to the control room. The meter was at three.

"Come on, come on…"

He checked his holster. Nothing. He had used up all his weaponry on that huge alien thing down below. Why hadn't he picked anything up?

"Dammit!" he yelled.

The meter reached four.

He heard radio chatter, not just from up above him, but also from down below. They were coming in from the entrance down below as well.

"Oh, for f-"

The metre reached five. He slammed the button and ran to the ladder just as he heard the metal door above get kicked down. Without hesitation, he clambered up. Two soldiers were stood in the doorway and looked over at him in alarm.

"Oh, screw *that!"*

Barney charged straight into them, knocking them on their backs before turning tail and sprinting down the walkway towards the ladder on the other side. He gripped the side and slid down, gritting his teeth as his flesh burned from the friction.

The entrance to the lab exploded open, two more soldiers pouring in as he reached the bottom of the ladder. Barney ignored them and ran to the glowing orb, hoping to God that there wasn't some sort of power failure that would make it suddenly vanish.

A green object clanked to the platform beneath the orb. A grenade. Undeterred, Barney reached the edge of the platform and leapt in.

The explosion sounded like a distant pop as the green light consumed him.

Blackness surrounded him.

After another green flash, Barney could suddenly feel fresh air around him. Sunlight poured down on his face, and he put his hand up to shield his eyes. He heard a clanking off to his left, and he looked over to see Bennett in front of a fence, whacking a padlock attached to the exit with a crowbar. It didn't look like he was having much luck. They were on a road leading out of a tunnel on Barney's right, the sign above it reading 'BLACK MESA ACCESS TUNNEL 50 MILES'.

Wow. That was pretty far out. The road was pretty bare, sand on either side leading into rocky hills that ran along the roads. On the other side of the hot tarmac surface was a Black Mesa SUV, where Rosenberg was stood with his back to Barney. He was talking to someone working under the hood of the van, presumably Simmons. He turned and looked shocked when he saw Barney.

Why did everything have a green tint to it?

"Ah, there he is!" Rosenberg smiled and bounded over, almost falling over himself as he came to a stop in front of Barney.

"Calhoun, you've arrived! When you didn't come through right away we thought that the…" his smile faded and he looked Barney up and down. "… oh no. There's something wrong here."

Oh, that sounded good. Barney frowned and looked down at his body, that green tint making him look like a Martian. Rosenberg called over his shoulder.

"Simmons, come look at Calhoun!" As Rosenberg continued, Simmons sprinted over. "His body seems to be in some kind of resonance displacement and I-"

A flash of green cut off the good scientist and Barney had never felt more alone. So he was going to die like this? With a green strobe light party going on in front of his eyes?

That was it. Next time he found a gun, he was going to shoot himself. Or at least concuss himself so he wouldn't think that everything going on was so bad.

After another flash of green, Barney found himself back on the alien world.

"Oh… groovy…" he grumbled. This was unlike the misty, grey/green world he had visited, though. Around him was just blackness, the only light coming from the huge yellow crystals on the small floating island upon which he now stood. He walked to the edge and saw several more islands around him. And on one of them… was that a dead body? Barney got to his knee and squinted. It looked like whoever it was… they wearing a Hazard Suit.

"Hey! Hey! Are you okay?"

Green light danced in front of his eyes again, whisking him away.

He landed on his back, and was pleased to see a very mundane, very human ceiling looking down on him.

Voices that belonged distinctively to the military made their way to his ears, and he quickly sat up, suddenly alert.

"Where're we taking this Freeman guy?"

Freeman? What? Barney looked around. He was in a storage room, a mop and bucket leant up against the wall. He couldn't see any light switches (or lights, for that matter) anywhere around, and struggled to see anything in his dim surrounding.

"Topside for questioning."

"What the hell for? We got him, let's kill him now!"

Barney whipped around to face the direction the voices had come from. A grate in the wall was at head level, looking out at ground level into another corridor. He rushed over to it as he saw two soldiers walk past, dragging an orange clad figure with them. As they passed, Barney instantly recognised his lolling head, his eyes barely open behind his thick rimmed glasses.

It was Gordon. The military had Gordon. The scientist seemed to look at him, but appeared so drowsy Barney had no idea if he recognised him or not. The soldiers, oblivious to his presence below them, continued on with their conversation as they walked further away.

"And if they find the body?"

"Body? What body?"

The soldiers laughed. His teeth grinding, Barney brought back his fist to slam it into the grate blocking his way. If he could knock it down he would be able to squeeze through and take them by surprise. Then, if he could get Gordon awake again, they could-

Green light consumed him and he cried out in frustration.

With another flash, he arrived outside again, where Bennett had managed to force the gate open. The SUV waited patiently in front of the open entrance, Simmons at the driver's seat while Rosenberg and Bennett stood around outside it. Simmons' eyes widened as they made contact with Barney, and he pointed him out to Rosenberg.

Rosenberg turned and smiled, rushing over to him. "Oh, thank God you made it. I thought a malfunction occurred at the last moment and you might have been caught in an infinite harmonic reflux. If that's the case then you're lucky to be standing here! But then again, we're all lucky."

He didn't even bother to try and understand what the scientist was saying. All he could thing about was Gordon being dragged away by those soldiers, preparing to do God knows what to him.

"Well doc, there are some people in there who aren't so lucky," he said, pointing over his shoulder to the tunnel behind him. "And I've got a duty to help 'em out. So, I'll see you guys off, and then I'm going back in."

All three scientists exchanged looks of horror.

"You're… *what?"* Rosenberg managed.

"I'm going back in. While I was teleporting around there, I saw a good buddy of mine in a lot of trouble. I've gotta get him outta there."

"But you have no idea where he is in the facility, Calhoun! Even after you've made the fifty mile walk back there, you'd have no idea where he would be! Think about this for a moment!"

"I have, doc. And I'd love nothing more than to just hop in that car with you and drive away. But I can't do it. So… see ya."

With a wave, he turned back to the tunnel.

"Calhoun-" Rosenberg was cut off gently by one of his colleagues.

A gentle hand rested on Barney's shoulder, and he stopped. Upon turning, he found Walter Bennett stood before him, hands in his pockets.

"I know how you feel, Calhoun."

His gaze was focused entirely on the tunnel before them.

"Somehow I doubt that, doc," he snapped, feeling annoyed by these scientists treating him like an equal when usually he would be nothing but dirt underneath their shoes.

He looked at him, tilting his head to the side. "No? I'll have you know my daughter is a security guard at the Black Mesa facility."

Barney blinked, and then lowered his gaze, feeling ashamed for his outburst.

"I… didn't know that. Sorry."

Bennett waved a hand, dismissing the apology. "It's perfectly all right. I've seen my share of sudden, angry outbursts today, let me tell you. Mostly from you-know-who," he said, pointing a conspiratorial finger at the worried figure of Dr Rosenberg a few metres back.

That elicited a smile from Barney, one of the few he had experienced since this day began. Both of them enjoyed the rare moment of levity for as long as it lasted.

Barney's smiled faded. "So… how come you're leaving without her? Your daughter, I mean."

"Because there's nothing I can do to help her from here. There's nothing I could do from inside the Black Mesa facility."

"But I *can*, doc. I've got the training and-"

"It doesn't matter, Calhoun. How long do you think it would take you to walk all the way down a fifty mile tunnel?"

He shrugged.

" *Too long,"* Bennett finished, his hands now firmly on his pockets. "By the time you reached him, your friend would most likely be dead, correct?"

An image of Gordon, beaten and bloody and lying in some abandoned office sprang into Barney's mind.

He took a deep breath and blew it out. "But how… how am I supposed to live with it?"

"By telling the world what happened here today. By getting help. *Real* help, not this military farce."

Barney closed his eyes, bowing his head. Eventually, he nodded.

"Okay," he said, his voice barely a whisper.

The two walked out of the tunnel and back to the hopeful looking Rosenberg.

He didn't say anything to Barney, he just cocked his eyebrow at him questioningly.

Barney smiled and nodded. "I'm comin', doc, don't worry."

With a smile that almost made Barney laugh, Rosenberg opened the back door to the SUV and gestured for Barney to get inside. He didn't get in.

"I've got one condition."

The scientists all paused in what they were doing. Simmons froze in his readjusting of the wing mirror. Bennett froze in his doubled over position as he crawled across the back seat. Rosenberg froze with his hand on the open door.

"Which is?" Rosenberg asked.

"I drive."

All of his companions exchanged nervous looks. Finally, Simmons shrugged, getting out of the car and holding the door open for their security escort. As he slipped into the front seat, Barney realised that from now on that was probably what he was going to be for the rest of his life. A security escort for these doddering scientists as they came up with weirder and stranger experiments for him to get caught up in.

It sounded like a sitcom. Simmons sat shotgun beside him, while Rosenberg slipped into the chair behind Barney. He looked over at his passengers.

"Everybody ready? Seatbelts fastened?"

They all checked and came back nodding.

"Got all our supplies?"

Again, they nodded.

"You guys gone to the bathroom? Because once we get going, I'm not stopping."

They looked at each other, confused.

"It's a *joke*, guys."

Although unsure of what was so funny, they all nodded and went 'ah', as though they all suddenly got it.

Barney shook his head and turned back around, starting the SUV. The engine thrummed to life, the whole vehicle vibrating soothingly.

"Okay, then. Say goodbye to the Black Mesa facility, folks. Because we are out of here."

"Calhoun."

He turned to look at Rosenberg.

"Yeah?"

"Thank you."

"For what, doc? It's my job."

"Not anymore it's not."

He laughed. "I guess not. Let's just say it's in my blood."

"I mean it, Calhoun. We will all be eternally grateful to you for what you've done today. Thanks to you, we were able to pull off this half-brained idea. We made it, Mr Calhoun."

Rosenberg looked around to all of the other scientists in the SUV, who returned his near euphoric grin. It truly made him look like the inspirational leader Barney knew his colleagues saw him to be.

"We *made it.* "

Barney slipped the SUV into gear, dropped the handbrake, and eased off the clutch. They set off through the open gates. Barney looked in his wing mirror and spotted something. He stopped the car and leapt out of the car, running back to behind the fence.

"Calhoun! What are you doing?" Rosenberg yelled out of the lowered window.

He returned in a few seconds, the crowbar Walter had been using to open the fence clutched in his hand.

"Just a little souvenir," he said, waving it about in the air. He handed it delicately to Rosenberg through the open window and hopped back into the driver's seat. As he clicked on his seatbelt, he looked in his rear view mirror. Rosenberg and Bennett were studying the crowbar.

"I'm curious, Calhoun," he said, looking up at him in the mirror. "Why the crowbar?"

Barney shrugged as he started driving for places unknown.

No, not for places unknown. To safety. To the future. To his friends. Because he knew Gordon would get out of whatever the military had set up for him. He *knew* . He knew that Gordon would sneak and

fight his way out of that place, because despite his mousey exterior, that guy had a fighting spirit in him.

Barney *knew* that he would see his extended family from the facility again.

Kleiner, Eli, Gordon.

He would see them all again.

Barney noticed that Rosenberg was still looking at him, expecting an answer.

He smiled. "You never know when you'll need a crowbar."

(A/N: Just goes to show that the spontaneous stuff is the best; that last bit with Barney picking up the crowbar was completely unplanned, but just seemed like such a great moment, as well as giving the story some more continuity (which I can't get enough of, personally).

And so we bid adieu to Barney. Hopefully you've enjoyed reading him as much as I've enjoyed writing; he's got a brand of humour that Gordon and Adrian can't really do, so I'll miss that. On the other hand, it's kind of fun to concentrate on the two big stories.

Anyway, reviews much appreciated, as always!

Next Chapter: Residue Processing)

Residue Processing

Disclaimer: I don't own *Half-Life.*

(A/N: Guess what I'm going to thank hhgbh for. That's right. Excellent biscuits. Also, beta-ing.)

The Black Mesa Incident

Chapter Eighteen: Residue Processing

Gordon splashed down into a very shallow pool of water, grunting from the impact. A small fleck of water entered his mouth as he grunted, and almost retched from the taste. He quickly stood up, gripping his crowbar tightly in his gloved hand as he walked out of the pool and onto solid ground.

The hot New Mexico sun bore down on his exposed neck as he walked onward, and, for the moment, it felt fantastic. Someone could only spend so long in an underground labyrinth before they yearned for some sunlight. He was in a canyon, the rocky cliff-faces on either side of him stretching up so high on either side of him it made Gordon stumble slightly when he craned his neck upwards to look at them. The boots patted gently against the rocky ground as he walked, echoing around the enclosed space.

He walked through a small archway in the rock and came out to a much more open area. In front of him on the far side was what looked like a power plant, but Gordon knew better. Judging by the smell and the fact that he had just escaped from a trash compactor, he would guess it was a plant dedicated to processing sewage and waste. It certainly looked like it had seen better days. There were some windows along the bottom, but even from where he stood Gordon was sure they were safety glass, making even his crowbar pretty much useless. A ladder on the left led up to a walkway that ran the width of the plant, and Gordon could make out some vents which

he hoped were used for ventilation placed along the wall at regular intervals.

Gordon headed towards the ladder when he heard a loud noise above him, something he actually hadn't heard in some time.

The teleportation noise faded as quickly as it had come, and two headcrabs dropped to the ground in front and behind him. The one in front leapt at him, hissing. He swung the crowbar around, catching it with the blunt side in the midsection and tossing it across the canyon floor and into another stray pool of stagnant water. Gordon whipped around in time to see the other headcrab coming straight at it his head.

He ducked and allowed it to sail over, landing ungraciously on the ground behind him. Crowbar held above his head, he charged at it and brought the pointed weapon down, going straight through the creature into the rock beneath. It made a half hearted growling noise as it died, and Gordon removed the crowbar.

He climbed up the ladder and to the first vent along the walkway. Sliding the crowbar between two of the bars, he pried it off and crawled inside. The metal of the vent was a dark brown, and Gordon hoped that was just its natural colour. After a few minutes of crawling, Gordon came to a vent cover in front of him, through which luminescent green light filtered through.

A scowl steadily working its way onto his features, Gordon ripped the vent cover off and dropped to the ground below. A tank of chemicals stood to his right, and judging by the green glow - not to mention the Geiger counter in his suit - it was full of toxic chemicals. Luckily, there was a doorway in front of him, and Gordon took it. Walking around the corridor with a certain purpose in his stride now that he knew he was moving away from radioactive waste, Gordon almost walked straight into the waiting tongues of about five barnacle creatures.

He looked up, his scowl quickly becoming a full blown deformity as far as his face was concerned. Without a gun, there wasn't much he could do about the barnacles except take the risk of allowing himself to be pulled up and then whacking the creatures to death with his crowbar.

With sigh, he knew what he had to do, and he walked back to the tank of chemicals dejectedly, climbing up the ladder on the side to reach the ledge. Inside the tank were two stirring devices, one after the other, although why toxic waste had to be stirred, he wasn't sure. From the side Gordon imagined that they would have a P shape to them, and the outgrowth at the top of the P was just thick enough to accommodate him if he were to jump onto it. An open vent lay at the other side of the tank.

Gordon sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose beneath his glasses, the area beginning to ache slightly from the constant pressure. This place was getting beyond ridiculous now. He waited for the stirrer to rotate around to him, and he leapt onto it, almost falling straight into the thick green ooze below. The P rotated around until the tip almost met that of its partner, and Gordon took that moment to simply step from one to the other.

He waited for the P to get around to the vent and stepped into it. It was tall enough to accommodate him, which, along with the inner red lights of this vent, made Gordon think that this passageway was used by workers at least some of the time. Well, it *had* been used by workers. Gordon doubted if the Black Mesa facility would be used for much of anything ever again after all this was over and done with.

If it was *ever* over and done with.

The vent came to an end in a deep room, the drop of which would no doubt result in Gordon breaking his legs and spending the rest of his life down there until his suit ran out of energy. A conveyer belt of all things, however, began just below him, moving into an open passageway on the left that was about the same size as the one he stood in now. On the right wall, a smaller tube spurted broken wood

and used metal, all of it ending up on the conveyer belt by some miracle of science.

With a shrug, Gordon leapt down onto the moving belt, falling back onto his rear as he lost his footing. He decided to just sit down and enjoy the ride as the belt took him down the red light corridor and around countless bends. Occasionally random objects would fall down from holes in the ceiling, but usually it was just wood and metal. Bloodied bones fell through every now and again as well, and Gordon did his best to turn away from them or simply look at something else. The military were throwing their kills into the residue processing system.

An entire skeleton fell down at one point, the black forms of two security guard's belts falling shortly after. Gordon managed to swallow the wave of nausea long enough to retrieve the belt from the top of the rotting remains. With some ingenuity and help from the sharp end of the crowbar, Gordon managed to fashion two straps that he could tie tightly around his left thigh. Positioning one of the holsters that was usually reserved for ammunition cartridges at his upper thigh and another just beneath it, Gordon managed to slip the crowbar inside both with little difficulty. With the hooked end at the top, Gordon would be able to take it out quickly at any juncture where he might need it. And the way it was positioned meant it wouldn't dangle about irritatingly or impair his movements.

And voila. Gordon Freeman, one of the knights of the Black Mesa table, had a sheath for his sword.

He frowned.

"'Knights of the Black Mesa table'?" he muttered to himself quietly, shaking his head. He felt a little ashamed of himself for saying such a 'sixteen year old nerd' type of thing. It was the kind of statement that would have earned him a slap around the back of the head from Barney, which in turn would have prompted a genuine 'thank you' from Gordon. It usually happened when they were around women and Barney was trying to make a good impression.

The sound working machinery came to his ears from around a corner, and Gordon got to his feet, his hand going straight to his crowbar. He couldn't help a smile at his own ingenuity. The crowbar strap really *was* a good idea.

And then he turned the corner. An incredibly powerful looking metal piston was launching itself out of the wall in front of him, smashing anything in its path into the wall, no doubt allowing the bits and pieces to be digested more easily by whatever chemically induced system was waiting for them. Past that piston, Gordon could see two more before the corridor turned a corner to the right. A completely unnecessary yellow sign reading 'WARNING: HAZARDOUS MACHINERY' dangled from small chains above his head.

Gordon removed his hand from the crowbar, deciding that he wouldn't be needing it. He back-pedalled on the spot directly in front of the piston, and he waited for the piston to slam into the wall and slowly move back before he made his move. A quick jog got him past that one, and the other two, working at the same rate as their brother, were fairly easy to bypass as well.

Smiling and breathing heavily, Gordon turned the corner.

Another borderline sarcastic sign dangled above his head with a warning about hazardous machinery. This time, the pistons were replaced by three industrial press type-machines, slamming down into the conveyer belt itself. The first slammed down twice in a row before steadily rising into the ceiling, which, after a few aborted goes and shouted exclamations, Gordon managed to get through.

The second slammed down into the belt once, and stayed there for a few moments before steadily rising and repeating the process. This one was pretty easy to bypass as well.

The third and last one, however, was a bitch. It slammed down twice on the belt, and just as Gordon was about to dash underneath, it slammed down a third time. The damn thing tried to pull a fake out on him.

Gordon hated fake outs. With a determined frown, Gordon waited for the three slams and then darted beneath, coming out the other side with a smile and quick, smug adjustment of his glasses.

And then he fell straight down off that conveyer belt, slamming heavily onto another below, this one going off to the right. With a groan, Gordon adjusted his now crooked glasses yet again as he sat up, taking in his surroundings. This place was a veritable maze of conveyer belts, more resembling an airport luggage system than a residue processing plant. He decided to stay the course and remain on the conveyer belt on which he sat, sitting upright and crossing his legs. When the crowbar on his left thigh got uncomfortable, he stretched both legs out straight in front of him.

The conveyer belt led into another red lit corridor. Coming up on the right and left, Gordon could see two grates, bright lights coming from both. As the belt took him closer, Gordon heard the sounds of flames, and covered his glasses before dashing through the brightly lit area. He was fairly sure the heat from the industrial strength flames scorched his hair, and once he was through, he ran and experimental hand through his cropped reddish-brown hair. He didn't have that much to begin with, he didn't need to lose anymore. With a sudden sense of horror, he checked his goatee as well. Still there.

He breathed a sigh of relief. At the moment his goatee was one of the few things from his previous mundane life that he had to cling on to. In his subconscious, as long as he held on to a few of those things (even if he hated them), like his glasses and strange beard, he would eventually be able to go back to those old days.

In his subconscious, anyway.

After a few twists and turns (but no more flames or industrial presses), a welcoming light at the end of the tunnel could be seen. As the conveyer belt reached it, however, Gordon couldn't help the loud yelp that escaped his lips as the belt suddenly ended, dropping whatever contents were unfortunate enough to be on it into some huge metal teeth below. The floor of the room was a square, all of

the floors at a downward angle leading towards the put in the middle where said teeth resided, chomping away with deadly regularity at whatever ended up on its surface.

It reminded Gordon of that Star Wars alien in the desert from 'Return of the Jedi'.

He leapt off to the side, dropping onto the inclined metal floor below him. Gordon figured that sliding towards it would give more of a chance to time it properly than jumping into it from a height. Much to his relief, however, he didn't slide down, somehow kept in place by the magical force of friction. Wary of getting to his feet, Gordon managed to stand up but kept a steadying hand on the ground as he carefully lowered himself down towards the teeth.

Chomp number one.

Chomp number two.

Chomp number three.

A few seconds…

And repeat. Gordon nodded, understanding the pattern. He rubbed his hands together as he counted, getting ready for the magic number. As the teeth closed for the third chomp, Gordon leapt into the red light tunnel below. His feet touched the conveyer belts just as the teeth closed above him, taking one his hairs with them.

A very quiet 'Ow' escaped his lips as he ducked down and rubbed the back of his head, glaring up at the chomping teeth irritably. Green light once again bathed him, and Gordon looked to the next challenge that awaited him. This one, luckily, was pretty damned easy. The conveyer belt ended up dumping all of its' mushy and smashed cargo into a tank of toxic waste. Luckily, just in case some insane person wanted to witness said event, a walkway led around the circumference of the very tall, green lit tank, leading to a red ladder on the opposite side which in turn led to a door.

Gordon just stepped off to his right and onto the walkway as the conveyer belt reached the appropriate juncture. He walked around, climbed up the ladder, and walked through the old fashioned handle wielding door. The red light of the corridor ahead felt like a warning, so Gordon reached down and withdrew his crowbar. He closed the door behind him and headed off to the unknown.

Knight of the Black Mesa table, indeed.

(A/N: I thought it was about time we got a reminder that Gordon is, at heart, a complete and total nerd. It should serve to show the differences between the good doctor and a certain Corporal once the latter's story starts picking up momentum.

And speaking of everyone's favourite soldier…

Next Chapter: Welcome to Black Mesa)

Welcome to Black Mesa

-1Disclaimer: I don't own *Half-Life.*

(A/N: hhgbh not only likes corny puns, but also does superb beta work!)

The Black Mesa Incident

Chapter Nineteen: Welcome to Black Mesa

"… three, four, five…"

Adrian Shephard could hear somebody counting. It was a weedy sounding voice, and not in keeping with the loud, bombastic tones of the soldiers he was usually surrounded by.

"… three, four, five…"

In fact, it sounded more like the nerdy kids from school who he would protect from bullies and (sometimes) pick on himself. Older, obviously but that same nasal tone to their voice, that same almost quivering effect to the way they spoke.

As soon as he heard it, Shephard knew that everything was not all right with the world. He quickly sat up, intense training making him almost instantly aware of his surroundings. An office. Everything white, with an almost silver polished sheen to it. A broken table in the middle of a room, a fallen bookshelf on his left. Blood spattered the floor and walls.

Two of his fellow soldiers lay around him, both of them dead. Without even examining them, Shephard knew a dead body when he saw one. His first dead body had been at age seventeen, and it was something permanently ingrained into every cell in his body. So by age twenty two, he could definitely tell that the soldiers littered around the room were dead. It was a rather morbid skill to have -

which his comrades would point out to him on a regular basis - but useful.

Morbid but useful. That was him.

A scientist with a moustache and big, uncontrollable hair was crouched over Richards, whose eyes were wide open, staring up at the ceiling hauntingly. His lab coat was tossed aside and his shirt sleeves rolled up in a 'let's get down to business' manner. He pumped Richards' chest again, sounding out of breath.

"… three, four, five…"

He pressed his ear to Richards' bulky chest and paused. After a few moments he sighed and gave up, his eyes wandering sadly over to the other body in the room, and then finally, over to Shephard. He looked alarmed at first, put it quickly gave way to relief. When he spoke, however, it wasn't relief that could be detected on his voice, just exhaustion.

"Oh, you're awake. Corporal… Shephard, is it?" Shephard obviously didn't hide his alarm very well, because the scientist waved a dismissive hand in the air to calm him.

"I read the tag on your uniform." He sighed and smiled sadly at him. "I'm glad to see my life saving efforts weren't in vain…" His gaze fell to Richards' inert body, and he gently closed the soldier's eyes. "I can't say the same for him," he continued, his voice a breathy murmur. With a deep breath through his nose, he composed himself and got to his feet, brushing off his black, dusty pants as he did so. His black and white striped tie had been pulled down to allow the top buttons of his shirt to be undone, revealing a sweat slicked chest beneath.

"I'm afraid you have been through a rather serious accident." He couldn't meet Shephard's gaze as he got to his feet. "Most of your friends didn't make it."

Shephard just nodded, barely taking in what was being said as he looked down at Richards. Another dead soldier was sat up against the counter on the right that ran the length of the room. He didn't recognise him. Looking down at himself, he saw that he was only wearing his khaki t-shirt, white and black camo pants and boots. His fingerless leather gloves were also still on his hands, the Velcro straps holding them tightly in place. He looked around the room. Where was his PCV?

The scientist, oblivious to any concerns on his patient's part, continued on. "I had hoped that you soldiers had come to rescue us, but now it seems that we are all in the same…" his voice trailed off for a moment while his eyes searched the wall opposite for an appropriate word, "… situation." He cleared his throat and looked over at Shephard with renewed vigour. "I think I saw a radio out near the crash site where I found you. Perhaps you could go there and radio for help?"

The young soldier rubbed the back of his sore neck, moving the hand up and around his short cropped blond hair in thought. His eyes closed, he nodded.

His companion clapped his hands and rubbed them together. "Excellent. Your… combat vest - is that the correct term?"

Eyes still closed, Shephard nodded again.

"Yes, well, it's in the, um…" he let out a quiet laugh, " *erstwhile…* observation area."

Shephard opened his eyes and looked at the scientist, waiting for more. "Which is… where?"

"Oh! I'm sorry. Yes, of course. Follow me."

He turned to the sliding door behind him and slid his ID card through the relevant slot. It pinged affirmatively and the door opened, allowing them through. The scientist talked over his shoulder as he

led Shephard into a room with nothing occupying it but a broken cabinet in the far right corner.

"I've forgotten what it was like to have visitors." He walked to some double doors on his left and pushed through, holding them open for Shephard to walk through. The soldier walked past him as he spoke again.

"Not that we got visitors that much before. This place wasn't really a shining light in the Black Mesa's itinerary."

Shephard wasn't listening. In front of him, protected by a glass barrier, his CO was being carried on a stretcher by two scientists. He, too, was dead. They took him around a corridor that went past Shephard and off to the left before they turned their backs to him and to some doors on the right. As they turned, the CO's head lolled around, his eyes still open much like Richards' had been. It almost looked as though he were looking at Shephard.

"This way."

It took him a few moments to gather himself and return to following the scientist, although he did allow one more glance back at the deceased before he disappeared into the double doors.

The scientist led him around a few more corridors, the green colour of the walls reminding Shephard of boot camp. Eventually he led him around a left corner and into a much larger room. A black scientist with greying hair around his temples knelt in front of a small cage - like one usually reserved for pets at the airport - prodding at something inside with a stick. Three tables were on the right hand side of the room, soldiers lying on the first two, a scientist stood between them, taking notes on a clipboard. On the final table at the far end of the room, Shephard saw his Power Combat Vest, helmet, and gas mask. He walked straight to them, glancing over at the bodies on the tables as he went.

At first, nothing seemed amiss, but as he moved closer, he saw that all of the bodies were horribly deformed, their flesh turned to a pink similar to that of a muscle, and some… *thing* on their head. It was pulsing nauseatingly, like it was suckling on their faces. His eyes were drawn to their chests, were blood had seeped into shirt almost in a straight line going down. The flesh beneath was deformed as well, rising up out of the chest and stomach as though it were being squeezed together.

He reached towards the wound experimentally when his tour guide quickly grabbed his wrist and pulled it away. Just as he did so, the shirt of the soldier before him tore open, revealing a tall, thin mouth that ran from the top of the chest to just above the navel, teeth resembling those of a sharks' lining it.

"What the hell is going on?" he hissed to the scientist, his eyes burning into his hosts'.

"You don't… know?"

Shephard pointed to his face and spoke through clenched teeth. "Do I *look like* I know?"

The scientist just stared into his pale blue eyes for a few moments before swallowing loudly and backing away. It was only then that Shephard realised he had been towering over the man threateningly.

"I, um… there was… an accident yesterday."

"What kind of accident?"

"We…" he looked around, hesitant. "… we don't really know ourselves. All we know is that these… creatures began to appear all over the facility shortly after the cataclysm. Many were killed almost instantly. Eventually, a group of scientists in Hazard Suits managed to signal for the military, which is, most likely, where you come into this equation." He looked as thought he wanted to say more, but thought better of it and avoided Shephard's penetrating stare.

Shephard cocked an eyebrow curiously. "Is that all?"

"How do you mean?"

"Is there anything else I should know before I go out there?"

"No, nothing." No hesitation, and he looked him straight in the eye as he said it.

Satisfied for the moment, Shephard nodded and walked over to his belongings on the table. He slipped on his white camo shirt first, quickly followed by the vest.

"Do you have any weapons here?" he asked, zipping up the front.

The scientist shook his head. "Our security guard downstairs might have one, but I doubt he will entrust it to you."

He searched for any negative tone on the word 'you', but found none. He reached around into one of the pockets inside his green vest and felt the button inside. He slapped a raised circular patch on the vest and squeezed his eyes shut as the needles slipped through his skin and into his spine. When he opened his eyes again, he saw the Heads Up Display fade into view, and he had to blink a few times before everything came into focus. As he waited for the nano-machines from the vest to spread through his system and assess his health, he slipped on his gas mask and helmet.

The scientist seemed to be uncomfortable at the sight of him now.

"Is the gas mask really… necessary?"

Shephard frowned. "Why?"

"Nothing. It doesn't matter."

He would have questioned him further, but Shephard really didn't care about him all that much. The green stats in his peripheral vision

clarified. His PCV was at 15, himself at 69. Not too bad considering what he'd been through.

"How do I get outside?"

With a few nervous glances back at him, the scientist turned and pointed. "Turn right out of this room, go down the corridor and turn left through the double doors. Once there, just follow the corridor and you'll get to the doors that lead outside. Clancy will open them for you."

He wondered why the scientist wasn't simply taking him there, but he was getting tired of how fragile and shaky these people were. With barely a nod he strode off out of the room, following the directions he had been given to the letter.

After going through the double doors, the corridor led him to the right, where, on the right hand side, were large observation windows and a door leading into a lab that had what looked to Shephard like an X-ray machine. A soldier, looking similar to those Shephard had seen on the tables, was lying on his back, slowly being moved into the machine on a mechanical trolley. A scientist in a containment suit worked on a control panel nearby.

The soldier stirred and got up off the trolley as it moved into the semi-circular machine, lumbering straight for the scientist. He grabbed his hapless victim by the shoulders and tossed him towards the window, sending him sailing through the air and straight through the glass.

Shephard dodged to the side to avoid the human projectile, whose screams were violently cut off as he collided with the wall opposite. The soldier watched as the monstrous apparition before him walked over the ledge of the broken window and into the corridor with him. With a noise halfway between a high pitched growl and a gurgle, the zombie creature brought his arm back and swung a long, claw fingered hand at him.

With a blur of motion, Shephard brought his left hand up to catch the blow and grabbed the zombie's bicep with his right. He pulled with his right hand and pushed with his left, snapping the monster's arm at the elbow. It howled and back-pedalled away from him. Shephard launched forward and clawed his left hand underneath the creature nestled on the soldier's head. With a powerful right hook to the lower face, Shephard knocked the man back and ripped the little monster from his head, the latter screeching all the way. Disgusted, he tossed it to the ground beneath him and crushed it with his boot. Yellow blood spurted out, covering the toe of the boot.

Slowly, he looked around at the body of the soldier behind him. His face was a burnt dark pink, his skin sunken and rotting away. His eyes, looking permanently panicked, searched the room around him frantically before settling on Shephard. His breathing was laboured, painful. Nodding, Shephard reached forward and put his hands on either side of the soldier's head. With his eyes closed, he twisted, snapping his neck.

After taking a few moments to grieve, Shephard rose to his feet and continued on down the corridor, turning right around the corner

This brought him to two automatic double doors, which opened for him with a quiet hiss. He walked down the stairs in front of him and ducked when he heard gunfire. Peeking over the banister, he saw an overweight, balding security guard - who he took to be Clancy - shooting a zombie in scientist's clothing, yellow blood spurting from its' body until it finally decided to die and fall on its' back.

Feeling no less cautious, Shephard walked down the stairs and directly to the guard, who was having a hell of a time holstering his weapon when he couldn't even see the holster because of his girth. He seemed to have accomplished the task just as Shephard reached him.

"Okay, Shephard, I see you found your power vest. That should keep you safe out there." He spoke with a ridiculously high pitched voice, and Shephard almost suspected him of putting it on as a joke. He

had a very thick Canadian accent which didn't help. They both stood around for a few moments, and Shephard began to wonder if the guard had some mental deficiency.

"Could you open the doors?" he asked impatiently, gesturing to the secured doors on his left that led out into another corridor.

The security guard pulled up his belt before thinning his eyes at the soldier. "See, now, I've heard rumours that you soldiers might not actually *be here* to rescue us."

Shephard cocked his head to the side, his voice deathly quiet.

"What?"

Looking suddenly afraid, Clancy put his pudgy hands up in defence. "Hey now, no offence intended!" He laughed anxiously. "Just… make sure you don't forget about us out there, all righty?" A small, incredibly nervous smile appeared on his face.

Blowing air out of his nose like a bull, Shephard just glared at him from behind his gas mask.

His eyes glued to the floor, Clancy pointed to the retinal scanner beside the double doors. "Okay, I'll let you through now." He rushed over to the scanner with much more speed than Shephard would have thought possible for a man of his girth, and put both eyes to the relevant lens.

After brief pause, the doors slid open, and Shephard couldn't get out of there fast enough, barely hearing whatever it was the security guard was shouting after him. He waited before he was around a corner before he relaxed his pace and started to take his time. They really went out of their way to hire freaks in these places, didn't they?

In front of him, casing for a lighting fixture lay on the ground put off to the side, and a cable dangled from the ceiling, sparks flying from it every now and again. A red toolbox and small ladder sat beside the

lighting fixture, and Shephard rummaged around for anything he could find that would suit his purposes. A red wrench seemed to fit the bill, and after checking its weight a few times, he continued on.

Upon turning the next corner, one of the ceiling tiles ahead crumbled, revealing two more of the little head-suckling creatures that had made zombies out of his fellow soldiers. One leapt at him right off the bat, and Shephard swung the wrench around, crushing the creature into the wall and splattering its innards all over it. The second little monster chose that moment to attack. Slicing the wrench down like a sword, Shephard crushed it into the floor just as he had done with the first into the wall.

Without pause, he walked to the door at the end of the corridor. He found himself at the bottom of a stairway. A door stood in the wall on his right, safety glass at the top allowing a view inside the room. The retinal scanner beside it meant that he probably wouldn't be able to gain access, but it wouldn't hurt to take in his surroundings.

It was a reception area, he could tell that much from the huge Black Mesa painting on the wall behind the long, thin desk. A door was opposite said desk, which was also closed. A security guard, far less portly than Clancy, stood behind the desk, talking to a man in a suit holding a briefcase. The man had deathly pale skin and stood so still while he spoke it was almost unnerving.

And he was familiar. Shephard knew him from somewhere. Where had he seen him before?

The man finished his conversation with the security guard, and with a small, smiling glance at Shephard, turned and walked through the door. Shephard banged his fist on the glass, trying to get the security guard's attention. It must have been sound proof, because the guard didn't even acknowledge him. With a frustrated cry, he swung the wrench into the safety glass, leaving only a slight crack on the surface.

With a lingering glare at the door, Shephard walked to the stairs and went up the three stories. An old metal door awaited him at the top, and he pushed his way through, stepping outside. He was on a concrete bridge that overlooked a huge canyon below. In the middle of the bridge, an alien creature that Shephard had seen before lay on its front, riddled with bullet holes and surrounded by dried yellow blood. As he knelt beside it, he remembered.

Waking from unconsciousness, drowsy from a blow to the head, lying beside a kneeling Davies. He had watched as Richards was electrocuted by…

"Green electricity…?"

A building on the opposite side of the bridge had a door that hung open, and Shephard recognised it even from that distance as the small room he had been lying in. Tentatively, he touched his hands to the back of his head. That moronic scientist had probably slowed the healing process by removing his vest. And removing it without proper procedure… it actually *was* a miracle he was still alive.

He looked back down to the brown creature below him. The black hilt of a military issue machete stuck out of its back. With little effort, Shephard managed to wrest it free and slipped it into the holster he had once had for his own machete. Only God knew what had happened to it, along with his regulation 9mm firearm.

With a thoughtful frown his only reaction, Shephard got to his feet and walked across the bridge and through the door. A doorway ahead of him was blocked off by fallen debris from the ceiling, but a defensive little crab alien creature pointed him in the right direction by emerging from a cracked hole in lower right hand corner. After swiftly disposing of said alien with the wrench, Shephard got down and crawled through the hole, and felt rock beneath his fingertips as he went on through a darkened passage, heading towards the light at the end.

It brought him out in front of a rock face that, along with the rock face on the other side, created a little slide going down on Shephard's left. Two pipes were beneath him, making the journey down to ground level all the quicker. When he reached the bottom he had to slow to halt to stop himself from falling on his face.

He took in the area around him. It was the place where he had first woken up after the Osprey had come under attack. On his left was a secure electrified fence, the remains of his Osprey tangled in its' distorted web. A watchtower stood proudly to the left of the fence, although whatever guard had once stood in it and overlooked the area was now long gone. Alien bodies lay around the wreckage of the Osprey, all of them the same as the one Shephard had pulled his machete from.

He didn't see any more of his fellow soldiers around, although, for all he knew, those soldiers back at the lab with those… *things* on their heads could be his fellow soldiers. Being studied by those scientists, poked, prodded, and tortured. Shephard had seen the torment in the eyes of the soldier he had freed from one of those creatures. It was not something he would want to see anyone exposed to, much less for a prolonged amount of time.

Electricity danced along the surface of the fence, preventing Shephard from gaining entry to what lay behind it. He could see a military radio on a table behind it, underneath a canopy. Just like the guy had said. Supply crates were placed all around it, and Shephard hoped he would find a weapon somewhat more useful than a wrench and a knife. Not that he couldn't do some serious damage with those weapons alone, but… he didn't trust these aliens to remain consistent. One minute they're throwing electricity, the next they could be teleporting behind you or something equally unbelievable.

The entrance to a tunnel was opposite the fence, the huge secure doors in the archway parted just slightly to allow entrance. Wrench held up in front of him, Shephard allowed only one last glance at the fallen Osprey before he slipped inside, plunging himself into relative darkness. The large tunnel arched around to the left, and Shephard

came across no trouble on his way there. Unlike the entrance, the exit door was wide open, allowing Shephard easy access into the area beyond.

On his left he saw the object of his search; the power generator. A warehouse stood behind the fenced off area. Four pale blue, tall boxes stood inside the electrified fence, light dancing viciously between them. On the far side, Shephard could see a small grey power box attached to the wall with a lever beside it. With a nod, Shephard moved to the gate that would allow him inside.

A sat security guard, trapped inside by the deadly voltage sparking around above his head, looked up at Shephard from inside the generator area, smiling.

"Hello, Mr Soldier Person!"

He moved to the gate and put both hands on it before Shephard could say anything to convince him otherwise. Shephard didn't know if the man was an idiot or just suicidal, but either way, he was roasted in seconds by the electricity. So at least he knew he wasn't getting in that way. A vent cover in the wall in front of him drew his eye. Looking over, he saw a vent cover at a parallel position within the fenced off generator area. He managed to remove it with the wrench without too much trouble and crawled inside. It was almost pitch black inside, and he had to turn on his night vision goggles with press of a button on his gas mask.

The vent shaft led him around two corners going to the left, eventually taking him out into the generator area. Stopping every now and again to allow the electricity to spark off in front of him, Shephard walked to the grey control box and pulled the lever. He could hear the generator powering down as he walked to the gate, kicking aside the charred corpse of the guard in order to allow him to pass.

His wrench idly hanging by his side, Shephard walked back into the tunnel. As he reached the point where the tunnel arched off to the

right and back to the fallen Osprey and the radio, a sudden noise made him stop. It sounded like an explosion and a crackle of electricity both at the same time. Green light emanated from around the corner and right behind him.

A low gurgle of a noise alerted Shephard to the presence of something alive both in front and behind him. He slipped his machete from its sheath and whirled around, tossing the knife at his would-be attacker. It tore through the air like a bullet slicing directly into the creature's main red eye with such force that it tossed the alien on its back, dead.

The alien's companion didn't take kindly to this as it rounded the corner, and Shephard turned to face it, tossing the wrench from his left hand to his right. This one was much closer to him, and he recognised it as the same kind of creature he had seen dead on the bridge, and all around the Osprey. Red eyes firmly trained on him, the creature slammed its hands together, and a green glow started to emanate from between them. Green electricity appeared from thin air, drawn to the glow.

Rather than wait for death like the moron Shephard took those scientists to be, he charged forward with the wrench behind him. The creature shoved its hands towards him, and electricity sprang out. Shephard leapt off to the side, rolling and coming up just next to the creature. With an uppercut of a swing with his wrench, Shephard cracked the alien's chin. It cried out and backed up quickly, cradling its injured mouth. Shephard continued forward at the creature and swung the wrench again, this blow hitting with such force that it snapped its neck, sending it flopping limply to the ground.

Without even looking at the bodies, Shephard went back to retrieve his knife and moved on.

Now that the fence wasn't electrified, he managed to make his way over it with little difficulty, paying little heed to the cuts he got on his arms from the barbed wire at the top. The PCV would take care of it in due course. He walked to the radio and found it already on. On the

left, he saw a raised concrete platform and two circular grates indented into the ground. The one on the right had a red ladder leading down into the ground beneath it. Suddenly, Shephard had a way out. He returned to the radio, and after some fiddling, he managed to get it transmitting.

"This is Corporal Adrian Shephard, I-"

Someone was trying to contact him already. With another flick of a switch, Shephard started receiving. Machine gun fire and explosions became permanent background noise as the radio spoke to him.

" *Shephard, you're alive!"*

Shephard frowned. Who was that? There were only a few people from his group who weren't dead. Although it was possible they simply knew him in association with his platoon.

" *Listen, we've been cut off pretty bad and orders are coming down to pull out! Repeat, pull out! Apparently they've got other plans for Black Mesa now! If you can make it through the transit system you can probably reach the surface where we are pulling out! Good luck! Over!"*

And that was that. Shephard didn't even get a word in edgeways. Not that he needed to. All the information he required, he now had. He went to the ladder and paused as he tucked the wrench under his arm for the descent into the relative darkness below. The words of the security guard rang in his ears.

" *Just… make sure you don't forget about us out there, all righty?"*

Shephard pondered the concept of going back and telling the people back at the complex where they should go and leave them to it. After all, it wasn't his mission to baby-sit them. Besides, he wasn't much of a leader for people who weren't trained soldiers. But then again… the more time he wasted here, the more likely it was that his fellows would leave without him, and then *no-one* he had met today would

have a chance of survival. No, the best course of action would be to get back to base and inform rescue teams of the whereabouts of the complex.

Satisfied, Shephard made his way down below. He skipped the last few rungs and hopped to the walkway below, the clang almost unnoticeable compared to the gushing water below.

Huge, thick brown pipe extended up from the beneath the water so far below him, surrounding him almost on every side as he walked down the walkway, wrench hanging idly by his side. He stopped when a grey rope like object lowered itself down in front of him. It was wet, and shone against the dim light available. He looked up and switched on his night vision goggles. On the ceiling, so far above him, an alien about the size of a barrel had attached itself, the grey rope looking like it was the tongue of the creature.

He took out his machete and grabbed the tongue with his other hand, quickly slicing it off. With a pained squeal, the creature withdrew. As he continued on down the walkway, Shephard began to feel like he was in a jungle with all the slicing of his knife he had to do.

After some wandering, Shephard negotiated his way out of the sewer system he had found himself in and ended up climbing down some more ladders until he ended up walking around what he took to be part of the transit system. Electrified yellow and black rails hung from the ceiling high above him, doors as big a volcano openings created in the walls.

To think that for some people, this was just the way to work. Every day, back and forth through his amazing tour of machinery. Almost made Shephard envious.

Almost.

He eventually ended up walking through a large doorway into a green lit room. Looking down, Shephard found that the green glow

was coming from a pool of toxic waste beneath the walkway. The walkway below him was in the shape of a cross. Two ladders on the right and left hand sides of the 'cross' lead up to a collection of walkways and support girders. The walkway at the top of the room went from the front of the room to the back. Shephard could see two doors on either side as well, and decided that was probably the way he needed to go.

As he walked to the ladder on his right, Shephard saw a large metal yellow box in the upper right corner of the room, black writing reading 'POWER GENERATOR'. In the left hand corner of the room, he could see an observation window. Although what there was to observe in this room, Shephard didn't know. He climbed up the ladder and to the girder that would allow him onto the walkway.

The generator exploded, and alarms sounded. Shephard looked down to the door he had entered through in time to see it close forebodingly. Electricity lanced out of the damaged generator, hitting the stone girder he stood on. He leapt to the walkway in front of him just as the pillar exploded, sending chunks of concrete and dust into the air.

He ran to the door on his right, but it didn't slide open. A red light above the door indicated that it was locked, and a quick glance to the door on the opposite side of the room told Shephard that that one was also locked. He backed up, looking around the room for any other escape route.

The floor below had collapsed into the toxic waste, dislodged by an explosion. The green liquid began to rise. More explosions littered the walkway around Shephard, and all he could do was hold onto one of the support pillars holding the walkway to the ceiling and pray he didn't get blasted.

The electricity stopped, but the alarms continued their repetitive cries, the radioactive liquid below him still rising. He looked over to the observation room, wondering if he would be able to make a jump

from the pillar to the room and smash the glass with his wrench. At the very least, he would die trying.

He cricked his neck and prepared himself for the jump, readying the wrench. The liquid was only a few feet below him now. If he was going to jump, it would have to be-

A man walked into the observation room, the familiar suit and briefcase visible even through the distorted reflection the green light was giving the glass. The man just stared at him as the liquid rose beneath him.

He straightened his tie and then pushed a button on a control panel in front of him. The door that had previously been locked beeped affirmatively, the red light turning green. Shephard launched himself from the pillar, sprinting through the sliding door and into the corridor beyond. Without taking a moment to rest, he darted down the corridor and around until he ended up in the observation room.

He was gone. No sign of him. No evidence he was ever there.

Desperately, Shephard looked around the small room, looking for some clue. He turned to the corridor behind the room and saw a closed door at the far end. He thundered down the corridor, his boots echoing loudly as he stomped away. The door slid open for him obligingly, revealing a small square room with a button on the far side. Looking up, Shephard saw two secure doors making up the ceiling. He was in an elevator.

"Where the hell did he…?"

With a frustrated growl, Shephard walked to the button and punched it, activating the elevator beneath him. He ascended in preoccupied silence, barely noticing that he secure doors only *just* opened in time for him to make it through.

He was in a huge chamber. A tank on his right, presumably filled with some manner of radioactive chemicals, overshadowed him. Behind

him was a large circular tunnel for the trains that were a part of the transit system. In front, a ramp lead up to a platform area, where Shephard hoped there would be a train waiting for him.

As it happened, there was, although there was a sizeable gap between the edge of the platform and the open door of the train. Below was what, to Shephard's eye, looked like a bottomless black chasm, and turning on his night vision goggles didn't change that assumption. He tossed the wrench into the train before backing up to the wall. If he was going to make this jump, he didn't need a wrench throwing off his speed.

He kicked off from the wall and sprinted to the very edge of the platform, landing with such speed inside the train he almost continued on through one of the windows. Extending his arms out, he managed to grab hold of the window frames and pull himself back in. The door to the train slid shut, and after some worrying creaking noises, it lurched to life, taking Shephard with it.

The rail beneath him took the train around to the left and through another large, circular tunnel. He slid into one of the chairs and decided to get some rest. Even though they were pulling out, Shephard had no doubt he would need as much strength as he could muster.

Because regardless of whether he saved his life or not, that prick in the suit knew what was going on here. And Shephard had every intention of wringing the information from his pale, scrawny little neck.

(A/N: Hopefully Shephard's debut lives up to your expectations. If Barney is John McClane, then Shephard is like a mix between Jason Bourne and Jack Bauer. That's what I was going for, anyway. Hopefully you'll be interested in seeing this guy travelling through the Black Mesa facility as much as you were Barney.

So review and tell me:P

Next Chapter: Questionable Ethics)

Questionable Ethics

-1Disclaimer: I don't own *Half-Life.*

The Black Mesa Incident

Chapter Twenty: Questionable Ethics

A ladder at the end of the winding, red lit corridors led Gordon up to a thick brown grate. Through the gaps, he could see a curious little alien creature peering down at him. Gordon recognised it as those whirring creatures that created the shockwaves. He didn't particularly like killing these creatures because of the whining noise they made. It was like he was shooting a dog.

He slipped out his crowbar and pushed the grate with his other hand. It didn't budge. After some awkward fidgeting around, swapping the crowbar from hand to hand and pushing at the grate with alternating limbs, Gordon put the crowbar back in its' sheath and gripped the top rung of the ladder. With a grunt, he swung his shoulder up and into the grate, knocking it from its placement in the ground above. It slammed back down again, almost hitting Gordon in the back of the head.

With a glare that would have made Barney laugh in its 'no more Mr Nice Guy' connotations, Gordon swung his shoulder up again, this time knocking up and over on its hinges, slamming loudly onto the concrete floor around it. Gordon clambered out of the hole and up into the room above, whipping his crowbar up defensively. All around him he saw cages not unlike those used by people transporting their pets on planes.

A tall fence stood on his right, blocking the way to a corridor he could see on the far corner behind the fence. A generator was in the other corner, bolts of electricity randomly leaping to a red rectangular shape attached to the top of the fence where it separated into a gate.

Gordon guessed that the metal fence was electrified, which meant he wouldn't be climbing over it any time soon.

The whirring noises coming from the four creatures surrounding him attracted his attention somewhat, and he responded by lashing out with a drop kick to the one closest to him. It flew off and collided with the wall, yellow blood smearing against the dull grey surface. Undeterred, the others continued their threatening noise. Gordon swung out with the blunt end of the crowbar for one on his right, and the sharp end for the one on his left. The former ended up sizzling against the electrified fence, while the latter, killed instantly by the sharp object penetrating its brain, refused to dislodge itself from the crowbar.

The last conscious creature standing behind him started up the noise again, and Gordon swung the crowbar, attached creature and all, around in a wide arc, thudding against the creature and managing to dislodge his unwelcome passenger all in one fell swoop. Both creatures hit the fence and exploded into little balls of crackling flame. This seemed to cause a chain reaction with the small generator on the other side of the fence somehow, and after some more borderline strobe flashing and random sparks, the red box on top of the fence post exploded. The metal fence gate flew open, and Gordon slipped through the gap and into the corridor beyond.

The first thing Gordon became aware of as he turned the corridor into the sterile green-blue laboratory was a dull thudding noise. With a frown that threatened to dislodge his glasses, Gordon searched around the room, crowbar held up high behind him while his other arm stood outstretched in front.

Because obviously, any aliens would find the palm of Gordon Freeman's hand terrifying.

A thick, tall black cylinder that reached from the floor to the ceiling stood in the centre of the room, a control panel on the far side of it. A door lay on the left of the powered down panel. Still wary of the thumping noise, Gordon started making his way towards the door. As

he walked around the black cylinder and saw that the half facing the control panel was made of glass, Gordon found out what was making the noise; and it was big. Not as big as the tentacle monster or the big blue thing near the rail system, but still… pretty big. Big enough to crush his head with its… claw.

It looked like a bigger, fatter version of the red eyed electricity creatures, but with better posture. Shiny black armour was clamped on its shoulders, head, wrists, crotch, ankles and feet. The arms were as thick as Gordon's torso, and while the one on Gordon's right simply had a large brown pincer like claw, the other had a pulsating three pronged device attached to it, which looked almost organic. The creature pounded both 'hands' against the glass containing it, and Gordon couldn't help but flinch the first few times.

But when the glass didn't budge, Gordon became a bit more relaxed, although he didn't turn his back on the creature as he continued for the door. With an awkward jolt, he walked into the closed doors. His subconscious still adamantly wanting his attention kept on the creature, Gordon spared some quick glances back to white, automatic doors.

Gordon sighed.

Automatic doors.

Powered down console.

Feeling less threatened and more annoyed by the noise the creature was making, Gordon walked to the control panel and studied it, although he still kept his crowbar firmly gripped in his right hand as he used his left to hover above the buttons. Inside a small glass box in the centre of the control panel lay a red button, which Gordon's subconscious had slowly begun to associate with bad things happening that were, unfortunately, usually necessary.

He closed his eyes and let his head hang, allowing the thumping from the creature behind him to echo around the room unimpeded.

Then, after taking deep breath, he lifted his crowbar and smashed it through the glass, the pointed end hitting with such force that it pressed the button down as it went.

The lights went out, the only sight Gordon was afforded coming from the small slits of windows on the automatic doors that would take him into the corridor beyond. Alarms sounded, and the creature's blows against the glass became ever more frantic. Gordon ran for the door, and it slid open painfully slowly. With one last mighty downward swing of its' arms, the creature burst through the glass, sending shards exploding outwards.

Gordon slipped through the gap and into the corridor beyond. It turned right instantly, and Gordon sprinted for all he was worth. He heard the creature plough through the white doors and growl in a manner that didn't make Gordon slow down, even as he approached the corner. He could see two automatic doors on the far left, and tried his best to turn on a dime as he reached the wall. They slid open slightly faster than the earlier doors, and Gordon slipped through. A sound like a buzzing insect shot down the corridor behind him just as he collapsed into the room beyond, and he spared a look back to see three red dart shapes embedded in the wall.

He whipped his head around and took in the room he now stood in. Sterile white walls made the already bright lights high above him almost unbearable. A silver slab of an examination table sat in the middle of the room, a strange contraption hanging ominously from the ceiling above it, some kind of focusing lens at the bottom. White doors stared at Gordon from the other side of the room, and on their right in the corner stood an observation booth, the door on the side open enticingly.

A low growl from behind the slowly closing doors behind him put a certain spring in his step, and Gordon almost slipped over on the metal floor as he ran to the doors on the other side of the room. With a speed that would have surprised Gordon under more peaceful circumstances, the doors opened. Two soldiers stood idly with their

backs to him, cigarette smoke wafting from the face of one while the other leant against the wall, his rifle dangling idly by his side.

Upon hearing the noise of the doors, they turned, eyes half closed disinterestedly. Instead of waiting for the inevitable gunfire, Gordon tossed himself off to the right and into the booth, rolling on his shoulder to make it all the way in. He heard the doors open on both sides of the room simultaneously, and the two forces opposing forces seemed to wait for a few seconds before ignoring their previous prey and concentrating on the monsters stood in front of them.

Gordon kept low, resting his back against the control panel in the booth, machinegun fire and buzzing noises putting a near permanent frown on his face. Cautiously, he placed a hand on the control panel above him and started to raise himself up. The panel didn't seem to want to give him any leverage, so Gordon pressed harder, and felt the surface beneath his gloved fingers move down slightly. Klaxons sounded and red lights flashed, the door to the booth slamming shut ominously.

With crowbar pointlessly held beside his head, Gordon peeked up over the panel and through the observation window. The apparatus above the table was glowing a dangerous yellow, and the rising volume of the noise accompanied the intensifying light. The alien, pale yellow blood trickling from wounds littered across its' body, looked up at the machine curiously. He could hear some muttered curses coming from the unseen soldiers beside him, as well.

Suddenly, the noise stopped, and, accompanied by a loud burst of static electricity, white light flooded Gordon's vision. A defensive and pointless hand reached up in front of his eyes, but he ended up trying to blink away spots anyway as the door opened with a thunk. Gingerly feeling the control panel for anymore big buttons, Gordon pulled himself to his feet and looked outside, still squinting. Random clumps of yellow gooey material lay in random spots along the other side of the room, and Gordon assumed them to be what was left of the alien.

He stepped to the doorway and winced at the similarly placed red masses on his side of the room. A black, melted mess lay on the ground beside one of the red lumps, and Gordon took that to be the soldier's rifle. He sighed as he glanced back down at his crowbar glumly. Comforting as it was, he *really* wanted a weapon other than a crowbar. The doors on his right opened and he pressed his back to the wall of the booth.

The second soldier from the corridor outside stepped in hurriedly, halting immediately as he saw the red stuff beneath him.

"Oh, *shit…"*

He knelt down, semi-automatic rifle pointed upwards in one hand while he reached a tentative hand down to the glop.

Gordon charged at him noiselessly, swinging the crowbar around with a quiet whoosh. It cracked through the soldier's gasmask as he turned to face his attacker, and he fell onto his back with a grunt. Another downward swing landed with a think between the eyes of the mask, cracking it even further. Gordon kept on swinging, hitting his hapless opponent again and again until blood spattered up and onto his glasses.

Somewhere along the way, Gordon had started breathing heavily, his shoulders heaving up and down as he crouched beside the mutilated soldier. The crowbar was held high above his head, ready for another strike while the other cautioning hand stood outstretched in front of him, palm open.

He noticed his glasses had slipped down his nose, and with a slow, deliberate movement, he pushed them up with a clinically steady finger. The light from above glinted against the soldier's rifle, and Gordon tucked his crowbar away in its' sheath before reaching over for it.

"Hold it."

The sound of a pistol being cocked.

"Back off, buddy."

Gordon looked over to the doorway. A security guard stood silhouetted in the doorway, feet set firmly apart. The smile almost broke out onto his face.

Someone else! Who wasn't a soldier or an alien! Gordon's relief was somewhat restrained due to the handgun being pointed in his general direction, but still… a human who wouldn't try to kill him at every turn.

Wanting to promote good relations early on in the game, Gordon put up his hands and stepped back from the rifle. The security guard edged his way into the room, his soft, friendly features becoming more apparent under the revealing lights of the examination room. He looked Gordon up and down, and then smiled, putting his handgun away.

"You look like a scientist."

Releasing a breath he didn't even know he was holding, Gordon nodded. He dropped his hands to his sides, his left accidentally tapping against the tip of the crowbar strapped to his hip. The guard's eyes whipped to the weapon before returning to Gordon again.

"But then again… what kind of scientist walks around with a spacesuit and a crowbar?"

He opened his mouth, trying to find something witty or icebreaking to say. He managed a shaky 'um' before the guard broke out into another smile.

"Don't worry, I'm just kidding. I know a HEV suit when I see one. And the crowbar… well, let's just call it personal choice, eh?"

Gordon didn't recognise the accent, but it was definitely American. Strong, commanding, probably very intimidating when put to proper use.

A large hand suddenly clasped his, shaking it wildly.

"I'm Kaufman. Eric Kaufman. Good idea turning on the de-atomiser," he said, pointing up to the contraption above them.

"Oh, um…" Gordon looked up at it discerningly. "Thank you."

"Now," Kaufman continued, turning and kneeling beside the dead soldier behind him, "I understand that a crowbar's probably all you've been using so far, but that's not going to get you much further."

The thought that he had fought his way up through countless floors of aliens, freak electrical mishaps and hostile soldiers crossed Gordon's mind.

He didn't say anything.

Kaufman scooped up the deceased soldier's rifle, checking it over in a way that seemed to suggest he knew what he was doing.

"Besides," he said, talking over his shoulder. "It's no good up there, it's all sealed off. The only way out would be to find someone with scanner access and get them to open the front door. I'm pretty sure there are some scientists hiding somewhere in the labs."

He roughly inspected the body itself and removed ammunition from various pockets and slots on the soldier's uniform. With a satisfied smile, the guard got to his feet, hefting the weapon up and down in his arms a few times as thought to weigh it. His smiling visage looked up to Gordon.

"Maybe with both of us looking we could track them down and get 'em to let us out. So how about it? We might live longer if we work together."

Gordon paused for a moment before nodding slowly. "Thank you."

With a modest, dismissive wave of his hand, Kaufman led Gordon through the doors, dramatically pressing his back to each wall and swinging around whenever they reached a corner. They first turned left, entering a soothing sky blue corridor, and then another right at the end. This corridor gradually inclined upwards. Kaufman nodded to a spot on the wall.

"That's where I was waiting. I managed to sneak around the soldiers up there and was about to take those two on when you distracted them. Good work on that, by the way."

Gordon cocked an eyebrow. "Good work on… the killing… or the distracting?"

"The distracting. That was a pretty sloppy kill you made in there."

"Oh. Right."

They reached the top of the slanted corridor and followed it around to the left until a right turn made Kaufman stop in his tracks. Gordon bumped into Kaufman's outstretched arm.

"Wait here."

The guard checked his rifle over again and then leapt out into the other corridor. Gordon heard only a few seconds of squawking radios and alarmed cries before the gunfire started. With a battle cry that made Gordon take a step back, Kaufman charged forward into the corridor, leaving Gordon stood cluelessly in his wake. He looked down at his crowbar in silent frustration as he heard more screams. He was beginning to miss Martha right now.

Bullets embedded themselves in the wall of the corridor, and Gordon noticed that the sounds of gunfire were getting further and further away. Cautiously, and with his crowbar once again held redundantly close to his face, Gordon peered around the corner. The corridor

opened out into a lobby area, sunlight shining in through windows so high up that they were out of sight from where Gordon was stood. On the far end of the lobby, Gordon could see another corridor, bodies littering the floor. Still hearing gunfire, Gordon made his way out and stalked into the lobby.

It was far bigger than the Anomalous Materials lobby. A Scientific Union symbol was painted on the centre of the tiled floor, sunlight filtering onto it through the glass of the rotating doors on Gordon's left. A retinal scanner beside the door waited for whatever scientist he and his security guard companion could find in this place. On the other side of the doorway, a HEV charging station stared back at Gordon cheerfully. With a perhaps a little too much relish, he plugged into the machine and let it do its' work, looking idly around the room as it did so. The reception desk stood at the very far right hand corner of the room seemed almost comically small compared to the rest of the room. Beside it were some stairs leading into another darkened blue corridor, automatic white doors waiting there for him.

The charging station made a negative noise to signal that it was out of power for the moment, and Gordon checked his stats. His health was at 55, and his suit now a heartening 83. Feeling a little more energy, Gordon sprinted across the lobby and down the stairs, promptly colliding with the doors when they refused to open with a loud negative noise.

"Hey! Where'd you go?"

Feeling a little dazed, Gordon turned with a small shake of the head and hopped up the stairs. Kaufman was walking out of the corridor he had left Gordon in, looking confused. His expression changed when he spotted Gordon.

"There you are. What the hell were you doing down there?"

He pointed. "Doors."

Confusion marred Kaufman's features. "Huh?" Standing on tiptoes, the guard saw what Gordon was pointing at and nodded "Ah, okay. Any luck?"

"They're locked."

"So no."

"No."

"No, as in they're not locked? Or no as in… saying no to me saying 'so no'?"

This time Gordon was frowning. He had PhD from MIT, and yet he couldn't understand what the hell this security guard was talking about. Gordon felt that there was something inherently wrong with that fact, but he decided to push it aside, signalling this to his companion with a shrug.

Continuing as though nothing had happened, Kaufman walked to the corridor littered with dead soldiers, chattering away happily as he went.

"Anyway, I took care of those soldiers."

Gordon looked the guard up and down as he walked alongside him down the corridor and around the bend. Aside from a few spatters of blood on his shirt and Kevlar vest and a slightly askew helmet, Kaufman didn't seem any worse for wear. The guard noticed his look and smiled.

"I guess you're pretty glad to have a security guard around to take care of it all for you now, huh?"

Actually, he wasn't. Gordon had thought that coming across someone willing to take care of everything would have been a relief. But it just made him feel uneasy and unsafe, and maybe a little bit queasy. As they rounded the bend, Gordon noticed the five dead

soldiers awkwardly splayed around the corridor. Gordon looked over at Kaufman, whose eyes were focused ahead of them, firmly on the job. Maybe having someone else that does all the killing wasn't that bad. Safety in numbers, and all that.

Two more doors at the end of the corridor were also locked, forcing Gordon and Kaufman to go up some stairs to their right, leading to a balcony that looked over the lobby. After some more wandering (led by Kaufman, naturally), they entered a lab area. Three control panel towers stood evenly spaced along the centre of the room, and on either side were semi-circular indentations in the walls. White metal domes lay in the centre of the indentations, a pole leading up into the ceiling above them. Gordon inspected the control panel on the wall beside the indentation, and saw a diagram of the large creature that had been held captive in the earlier lab.

"What is it?" Kaufman asked, leaning in uncomfortably close beside him to look at the screen.

Gordon looked over at him. "You don't know?"

"Hey, I'm only security," he said dejectedly, and a little bit angrily. "I just make sure people are safe."

After a brief lingering look at the guard, Gordon walked over to the indentation on the other side of the room. It was the same thing there as well. They were containment pods. At the push of a button, they would rise out of the ground and unleash the two giant aliens upon whoever was inside. Perhaps somebody had already done so. But that wasn't what was bothering Gordon. The people in this facility were experimenting on these aliens, and they had machinery that looked like it was specifically designed to contain them. Which meant these aliens had been coming to Earth far earlier than Gordon's little accident in Anomalous Materials. Perhaps they were even *brought* here… taken to these labs and experimented on…

No wonder they were so hostile.

But then, some of them wore armour, which suggested they were prepared for battle. So if these huge creatures had been taken earlier than the 'incident', that would mean they were hostile long before Gordon opened the floodgates.

"Okay, again, I repeat; what is it?"

Gordon's gaze, which had become permanently fixed on the ground in front of him while he thought, whipped up to meet Kaufman's.

"It's…" he looked to the control panel, and then back to the guard. "… nothing. We should go."

"You're sure?"

Gordon frowned. 'You're sure?' What kind of question was that? Of course he wasn't sure? He was an absent minded, easily distracted, clumsy scientist. How the hell could he be sure about anything like this?

"Um… yes."

Kaufman seemed slightly put out by this for whatever reason, but eventually opted for a nod before gesturing to some doors on the other side of the lab.

"Maybe there are some of our guys this way."

He watched the security guard lead the way before casting another cursory glance around at the two pods that were embedded in the ground below. His one-handed grip on his crowbar tightened, and he followed his new companion. The sound of an explosion made him increase his pace through the automatic doors and around the brown corridor, where he saw Kaufman stood in a large doorway. A large scorch mark lay on the ground in front of him, and Gordon heard the crackle of something burning in the blue lit corridor beyond.

"There were some soldiers. I took care of them with a grenade."

Despite not being able to remember Kaufman ever picking up a grenade or even seeing one on his person, Gordon decided not to look a gift horse in the mouth and simply smiled and nodded.

"Okay, there's a surgery room just this way," he continued on, gesturing with his rifle to the right. Without waiting to see if Gordon was coming or not, Kaufman set off, leaving Gordon to follow quickly in his wake. As he stepped through the threshold into the blue corridor, Gordon saw two burning dead bodies on his left, which just made it all the more easier to follow Kaufman to the right.

The corridor bent around to the left in a semicircle shape. A mechanical whirring gradually found its way to Gordon's ears, and Kaufman stopped in front of a door on the wall on the left.

"See? Surgery room."

Gordon peeked in through the small slit of an observation window, but he evidently got too close, because the door opened in front of him. He stumbled inside but quickly straightened up as his nose was almost sliced in half by a rotating red blade. A raised walkway led up the middle of the room from where Gordon and Kaufman were standing to another door on the opposite side of the room. Two operation tables were on either side of the walkway, contained in an area slightly lower than the metal platform running between them.

Two metallic shapes, looking like 'L's that had been turned on their sides, extended from a circular structure in the middle of the ceiling. They swung around the room in a complete circle. Horizontal metal poles extended out both ways from the shapes, pointed, razor-sharp red cross shapes spinning wildly in their placements.

Gordon and Kaufman looked at each other, and the security guard shrugged. "You've got the spacesuit. I ain't going through there."

Even Gordon could see it was impossible to get to the door at the other side, if there was even anything of value in that room to begin with. The control panel in front of him - which Gordon presumed was

for the surgical unit - was unresponsive to his efforts. But if this day had taught Gordon anything, it was that there was usually some strange, difficult and ultimately exhausting way to get where one needed to go. The important thing, however, was that he got there alive instead of in neatly sliced pieces.

"Is there an upper level?" he asked, looking over at Kaufman.

The confused look returned. "Uh… why?"

He just pointed to the ceiling. Kaufman still didn't get it, but nodded anyway. "Okay, uh… should be some stairs this way." He turned and left the room. Gordon, after a quick glance back at the spinning, whirling blades, followed suit.

Kaufman took him into a darkened corridor with two glass windows in the walls on either side. Inside, headcrabs wandered around their little prison cells, leaping at Gordon when they noticed his presence. It just added more credence to Gordon's theories. He wondered if he should be morally outraged with the scientists who had, in many ways, precipitated this whole event.

A stairway between one of the observation windows took them up and around a right corner leading to some more stairs. Inhuman snarls and gunfire made Gordon duck his head, while Kaufman's ears seemed to perk up at the noises. The security guard was only too eager to sneak his way up to the top step and peek around the corner to the right, observing the corridor beyond.

Gordon cautiously poked his own head around. The corridor stretched on in front of them for a considerable length. Half a dozen or so rooms and corridors led off from the main corridor. The closest was an entrance to a corridor on the left, and Gordon very nearly shot off to it when he remembered that he had someone else to consider when it came to survival plans.

Several soldiers did battle with two of those two legged bullsquid creatures, their tentacled mouths spitting out all manner of

luminescent liquids at them. The globs of liquid that did hit the soldiers seemed to burn them like acid, and Gordon took due note not to be on the receiving end of that attack. As resilient as the HEV suit was, he had no idea how acid would (or wouldn't) affect it.

"I think you should make a break for that corridor while I take care of this," Kaufman muttered over his shoulder, the light contempt dancing in his tone becoming just ever so slightly apparent to Gordon.

But instead of commenting, he just nodded. No sense in causing any more of a scene than what was already playing out in front of them.

"Okay, on three? Is that all right with you?"

With a sigh, Gordon just ran for it, practically feeling Kaufman's glare burning into the back of his head as he went. The sound of gunfire burst out from where the security guard had been. Gordon dove for the corridor and rolled with the momentum, ending up on his back and staring up at the ceiling. Bending his head upwards, he watched as Kaufman charged past down the main corridor, the expression on his face completely focused on his task. It was admirable and a little bit frightening all at the same time.

As he got to his feet, Gordon frowned. Were those… voices?

"What is this? Some kind of weapon?"

He pulled his crowbar out and looked around. It sounded like it was coming from down the corridor. Of course, the gunfire and various screams were making it difficult to make out. A noise that sounded somewhat like the charging noise of the Anti-Mass Spectrometer back at Anomalous Materials drifted up to Gordon as he made his way down the corridor. Another voice spoke, this one cautioning and a little bit impatient.

"Put that down… it's a prototype…"

Gordon reached the end of the corridor. Nothing but some crates randomly stacked in the corner against the wall.

And then they exploded.

He barely had time to put his arms up and let the splintering wood fall around him. Slowly, he brought his arms down as he heard the unseen conversation continue. His gaze fell on the wall opposite, his eye drawn by an orange glow coming from the wall. Rather than put his hand anywhere near it, Gordon backed up the corridor, making sure he didn't back into the line of fire. He picked up the crowbar and put it back into its' sheath.

The first voice spoke again, much more excitedly this time. "Man! Why aren't we using it?"

"It's much too unpredictable. Don't let it overcharge!"

Gordon crouched and wrapped his arms over his head protectively.

"What do you mean 'overcharge'?"

And then the wall exploded.

A cloud of white pushed out towards him as he slowly lowered his arms and got to his feet. Crowbar instinctively in his hand, Gordon edged to the hole in the wall and stepped through, squinting from the dust. He waved a futile hand around in front of him to clear his vision. The dust clung to his glasses, and a low, almost inaudible grumble escaped from his lips. He tried to wipe it away with his gloved hand, which only served to smear it messily across his vision.

But it did clear it up *somewhat*, so Gordon continued on into the room. His foot made a light thunk noise against something metal, and he stopped, his head quickly going down to what had intercepted him. A thick, tube like device lay at his feet, pipes and canisters attached on either side of its vaguely triangular shape. It had a shiny orange tip that, strangely enough, matched Gordon's

HEV suit. In the middle of the device was a rectangular shape that swayed from side to side as Gordon picked it up. Something about it looked familiar, but he couldn't quite place it. There was a trigger at the back, and, thought processes overcome by scientific curiosity, Gordon pulled it.

An orange bolt of energy flashed out of the orange tip, hitting the wall of the room that was still mostly obscured by dust. The spot on the wall he had hit glowed in a way that Gordon found strangely satisfying. A voice sliced through his warm fuzzy feelings, and he quickly got back into what he recognised as his emotional state for much of the past day or so; abject paranoia and fear. But since those two things had kept him alive, Gordon didn't complain.

"What the *fuck* was that?"

He wasn't sure if that was a soldier or Kaufman, but either way, he decided to vacate the premises of whatever lab he had wandered into. He went back through the dust cloud and into the corridor beyond before hurrying to the main passageway.

A quick peek around the corner told him that his orange bolt of energy had gone through the wall, blowing up some crates just beside a soldier crouched in a doorway. Two dead soldiers lay on the ground in awkward positions, blood spattered along the walls and ground. He judged from the angle that Kaufman had shot them from the room just ahead of him, down the corridor and on the right.

The three remaining soldiers spotted his curious looks and took aim, unleashing a volley of fire that made Gordon throw himself back behind cover. He heard Kaufman firing away, and he rushed over to the room he assumed his security guard friend had taken refuge in. The blue walled room yielded the desired result, Kaufman crouched breathlessly just next to the open entrance to the room.

"What the hell are you doing? I said I'd handle this!"

Gordon tried to think of an excuse, but all he could come up with was honesty. "They saw me."

"Oh, that's great. Look, just… stay here, all right?" He spotted the device in Gordon's hands. "What the hell's that?"

He opened his mouth to reply, and Kaufman put up a hand.

"Never mind. I'm going out there to take care of them. You see if there's anything useful in this place."

Gordon looked around as Kaufman launched himself out into the corridor. A giant cannon was propped up facing the wall, the corresponding control panel on the other side of the room. He recognised it as a laser he had read about in a science journal… something about the revolutionary new power source involving six different types of lenses…

He looked down at the device in his hands. Which would mean that what he now held in his hands was the Gauss Gun, nicknamed the 'Tau Cannon' by the scientist who worked on it. Rumour had it that it was the result of a rare alliance between Black Mesa and their competitor, Aperture Science.

But none of that told Gordon what the hell the thing could actually *do* . The sound of approaching booted footsteps brought his attention to the entrance, and Gordon aimed the orange tip of the Tau Cannon in that direction. The words 'overcharge' reached his conscious mind, and he pulled back the trigger, this time holding it down. The rectangular shape in the middle of the device started spinning, building speed and the oscillating noise increasing in pitch the longer he held the trigger.

Two soldiers swung themselves around the corner with their rifles at the ready, and Gordon fired. The blowback from the weapon knocked Gordon on his back, but still managed to hit the soldier on the left dead centre in the chest. It impaled him to the wall with such

force he left a slight indentation in the wall as he slipped down to the ground, well and truly unconscious.

The remaining soldier looked back at his fallen comrade, and then back to Gordon.

Something about that desperate movement made an uncharacteristic grin break out onto Gordon's face. Finally. After all the desperation, all the fighting, running, falling, hiding… *finally* he had managed to scare one of them. *Finally*, they were beginning to understand just what Gordon and everyone else in the facility had been feeling since the military arrived.

"Oh look," he said, looking down from the weapon and then back up to the soldier, "a new toy."

He fired again, hitting the soldier in the head and making him back flip ankles over elbows before landing on his front with a loud thump. Gordon was on his feet almost immediately, the gunfire from the corridor outside keeping him on edge. He looked around to the laser cannon again, and saw the blank wall in front of it. Above it was a sign reading 'DO NOT BLOCK BLAST SHIELD'. After a cautionary glance back to the open entrance to the lab, Gordon walked to the wall, the two thin windows on either side piquing his curiosity. He could see another room quite a few feet below, and it looked nowhere near as polished as the rest of the lab.

A random feeling he supposed was a hunch informed Gordon that getting down there would probably point the way to freedom. Looking around the room, he saw the control panel that would activate the laser. The blast shield was tucked safely into the ceiling above, and would no doubt lower itself automatically upon him activating the laser. A metal crate in the corner solved his problem, and with a triumphant little smile, Gordon walked over to it and managed to shove it into the path of the blast shield, but not the laser.

He went to the control panel and slammed a palm down on the red button. The gunfire continued on outside. The laser powered up

loudly, and the blast shield doors started to lower. They quickly collided with the metal crate below, however, and after a few more fruitless attempts, it gave up and dejectedly returned to its' place in the ceiling. Now unimpeded, the laser cannon fired, a thick red beam cutting through the wall almost instantly. Gordon checked over the Tau Cannon in his hands before gripping it tightly in a manner that reminded him of all the good times he had had with Martha.

He cocked an eyebrow.

Good times? What good times?

With an absent minded shake of his head, Gordon dashed out to the edge of the entrance to the lab, peeking around the corner. He could see two soldiers in the room on his upper left. They fired relentlessly into the room opposite them, where Gordon assumed Kaufman had taken refuge. It was an impressive display to watch; one taking cover and reloading while the other fired away. Not that Gordon minded interrupting it.

One of the soldiers suddenly decided to take the initiative and advanced on Kaufman's room, M4 held up cautiously. Gordon decided that was as good a time as any to get involved, and whirled himself around the corner, charging the Tau as he went. By the time the soldier bothered to look over at the orange clad intruder in his midst, Gordon had fired, hitting him dead centre in the stomach. The soldier shot off backwards down the corridor, hitting the ground and skidding before eventually slowing to a halt.

Both parties stopped firing. Cautiously, both Kaufman and the soldier whipped their heads around their respective corners, looks of matching incredulity on their faces. Gordon promptly shot the soldier's head off, knocking him back into the room from whence he came. Kaufman let out a most un-security guard like yelp when Gordon did so, but quickly managed to regain his previous demeanour of 'can-do' hero.

He got to his feet and walked to Gordon, looking at the dead soldiers around him before coming to a halt in front of him.

"That's one hell of a gun."

Gordon looked down at the Tau before looking up at his companion. "Yes."

"Really did some damage."

"Yes."

"… can I have it?"

He thought about if for a moment. "No."

At first, Kaufman seemed ready to come back with an irritated comment, but then calmed down.

"Scientist fighter likes scientist weapons, huh?" Kaufman nodded, smiling wryly. "I can live with that. So," he continued, walking into the lab, "you find anything in here to get… us…"

The security guard trailed off when he saw the crumbling hole in the wall.

"Oh." He looked over at Gordon. "Good work."

Gordon merely pushed his glasses up his nose by way of acknowledgement.

They managed to clamber their way down to ground floor by shimmying their way along and down some pipes, eventually landing on some crates before finally reaching the dreary brown cement floor. There was a small stairway leading to a door, and with a small, polite gesture, Kaufman let Gordon proceed ahead of him. With a nod, the scientist proceeded to the automatic white door, stepping through into the small room beyond.

Three scientists stood inside, all of them whirling around in surprise upon his entrance. In front of him, a closed door leading into the out of control surgery room he and Kaufman had been in earlier.

A female scientist with curly brown hair smiled widely upon seeing him. "A scientist! Thank God! Get us out of here before those military drones figure out… where we're… hiding…"

She trailed off in a manner similar to Kaufman earlier upon seeing the security guard.

"Ah. Kaufman. I see… you're all right."

The security guard nodded to the three. "Nice to see you again, guys."

His charges didn't seem to share his feelings. Gordon deduced that he was probably imagining it, but they almost seemed afraid of Kaufman. But that was impossible, especially in a situation like this. Anything and everything would probably scare them on a day like this.

No-one spoke for a few moments, before a small man that reminded Gordon of Dr Kleiner cleared his throat, weedy voice already evident just from that noise.

"We… all have retinal scanner access. Escort us to the lobby, and you can get out of the lab."

This seemed to give the third of their number the courage to speak. A tall, skinny and bald black man, his deep voice contrasted heavily with the earlier, weedy tones of his colleague.

"You'll have to turn off the surgical unit first. Peters switched it on, but I'm afraid he never made it back. You'll need the security code he entered. It's two three six four."

Gordon looked to the door, and after checking over all of their faces, nodded resignedly. He stepped to the white door, and it opened politely for him. In front of him, the surgical unit span out of control. He looked back to the black scientist and held out the Tau cannon to him.

"Could you hold this, please?"

Kaufman seemed ready to object to this, but the scientist snatched it up before the security guard could even move.

"The Tau Cannon…" all three scientists said, huddling around the device like moths to a flame.

After taking in the familiar tableau, Gordon turned back to the surgical unit. He took some deep breaths, and, after checking that his glasses were on straight for what felt like ten times, he dashed forward into the lab. One of the surgical bars swung at him as he reached the middle of the walkway, harmlessly going around him as he reached the 'eye of the storm' as it were. He bounced up and down on bent knees before dashing forward again, this time reaching the control panel.

No cheers went up from the other side, but Gordon could see the breathless anticipation on their faces as he punched in the code on the control panel. With a steadily decreasing whine, the unit quickly turned off, coming to a complete stop. His four companions didn't need much convincing to make the quick run from one end of the room to the other. The Tau was handed back to him with such reverence, Gordon felt quite embarrassed.

Kaufman reloaded his rifle. "Congratulations later, people. Let's get to the doors and outside, shall we?"

The brown haired scientist nodded, clearing her throat shyly. "Yes, quite right. Follow us."

Within a few minutes (and courtesy of a few shortcuts even Kaufman seemed surprised by), they were back in the lobby, the rotating glass doors beckoning to them. The leading scientist had to pull her hair back over her head in order to get the retinal scanner to work.

"Well," she said, bending forward to get her eyes in line with the correct lens, "I'll let you out, but I'm warning you, it's *hell* out there. It's completely under military control!" A positive chime came from the device, and a loud noise of something unlocking came from the rotating doors.

"You'll have to *sneak* and *fight* your way from one end to the other." She said those two particular words with such venom Gordon was almost convinced. The scientist continued on, unimpeded by Gordon's discomfort.

"And I don't expect you'll meet many of our peers along the way. But," she said, the lack of confidence in her eyes not making Gordon feel much better, "if you *do* survive, and somehow make it to the other end of the base, you'll end up at the Lambda complex, where the rest of the science team has taken shelter. I wouldn't venture there myself, but… I *will* let them know that you are coming."

It was then that Gordon realised that not once had the scientist addressed Kaufman. That entire speech had been directed towards Gordon, and no-one else.

"You go ahead there, Gordon. I'll make sure these guys are okay and then I'll join you. Okay?"

He looked around at the three scientists. All three of them looked reluctant, and, once again, Gordon noticed that none of them were looking at Kaufman.

Gordon nodded to Kaufman's request, and then smiled and nodded to the scientists. "Thank you."

With that, he turned to the rotating doors and pushed. When they didn't move, he frowned and turned around to look at the four Black Mesa employees behind them. Then, with a sudden jerk of movement, the ground beneath him moved around. The New Mexico sun bore down on him oppressively, the heat already making him worry about sunburn. Ludicrous, the things he found to worry about at times like these.

He stepped out of the complex and onto the hot concrete around it. The building was built into a rock face, and the rocky walls went around him like a miniature quarry. On his right, he noticed a tunnel big enough to accommodate a truck and made towards it. By the time Kaufman got out, he could have scouted ahead and hopefully found a suitable path for them to follow.

As he stepped away from the building, a familiar whine assaulted his ears, and he turned in time to see two military turrets propped up on the roof of the building activating themselves, their high calibre weapons pointing down at him ominously. Gordon lifted the Tau just as they managed to get off a few shots to his midsection, winding him. With a grunt, Gordon fell to one knee, his aim somehow remaining steadfast. One shot was all it took to destroy one of the turrets, and, much to Gordon's surprise, the yellow bolt bounced off the first target and took out the second.

At a lack for breath, Gordon got to his feet, checking his stats. The suit was now at 76, which wasn't bad for all the combat he had gone through. His own health was still at a respectable but not exactly confidence building 55. Hopefully he would come across some med kits to help him along.

The rotating doors jolted to life, and before long Kaufman stepped through, looking a little dizzy.

"Damn! That thing really takes you for a ride, doesn't it?"

Gordon nodded, then gestured to the building. "Are they all right?"

"Hm? Oh, yeah, fine. They'll hold up until we get whoever back here to pick 'em up. So," he said, a measure of apprehension in his voice. "Onwards and upwards, huh?"

While glad to finally have someone travelling with him who was as reluctant about these things as he was, Gordon actually found himself missing the gung-ho approach of people like Bennett or Harv. Something about their childlike appreciation of the 'survival-at-all-costs' mantra somehow made it easier to deal with.

But as he watched Kaufman enter the tunnel like a member of a Counter Terrorist Unit, Gordon pushed those thoughts aside and followed. After all, he needed all the help he could get.

The tunnel bent around to the left, and they followed it to a large archway of a door. A simple control panel with two buttons on it beckoned them forth. An unlit green button stood atop a lit red one. Gordon reached over to it, paused, and looked over at Kaufman.

The security guard, his weapon pointed at the door, gave Gordon a nod.

He pushed the button, and the door opened.

(A/N: For those of you who have played the game, there was some pretty obvious selective editing of this level, but I think the most important thing about the *Half-Life story* is that it's always in motion; Gordon rarely, if ever, has a chance to stop. So any edits in future chapters (hello, 'Surface Tension'!) are all with that goal in mind. Sometimes there are stops in the game play to allow for puzzles which might be good fun to play, but in writing… they're just not that interesting.

Kaufman is based on the crazy ass-kicking powers of the 'Questionable Ethics' security guard. Seriously, that guy kills almost every single soldier in the lab when I play through.

Gordon's 'A new toy' comment is completely taken from Pisces fantastic 'Follow Freeman!' drabbles (I'm hoping Pisces will be flattered rather than angry at my using it in the story). I just like the idea of that being a Gordon 'catchphrase'. It pretty much describes the feeling players get when they pick up a powerful weapon. Well, I do, anyway.

So… reviews, please!

Next Chapter: "We Are Pulling Out")

We Are Pulling Out

Disclaimer: I don't own *Half-Life.*

(A/N: Hhgbh gets many thanks for beta work and a happy birthday salutation!)

The Black Mesa Incident

Chapter Twenty One: "We Are Pulling Out"

As the train thumped him around the bench on which he sat, Shephard wondered if it was just the circumstances of the day that left this ride so bumpy, or if the workers at the Black Mesa facility got about like this every day. If they did, his respect for them shot up ten fold. Which, admittedly, wasn't much to begin with. The once soothing voice that came over the speakers stopped and started at random intervals, computer glitches making it go faster and slower at every turn of the train.

" *This train is… I-I-I-I-I-inbound… SECTOR C… t-e-e-e-e-e-e… laboratories."*

He probably would have found it funny if he wasn't clinging on for dear life.

The train went through a large tunnel before jolting to a halt at the bottom of a platform that gradually started going up, spinning around as it went. The effect was a bit dizzying, and Shephard focused on the gap on the floor in front of him where a disabled logo had been painted.

People in wheelchairs *use these? And* don't *die?*

Shephard was impressed - if not a little bewildered - by that fact. The platform came to a halt at the top before the train continued on, this time attached to a rail above his head, leaving Shephard with the not

exactly pleasant sensation of floating in midair. An endless chasm yawned out below him, welcoming anything that fell into it with a velvety blackness.

He could see another train going about its' business (whatever that was at a time like this) below him, travelling along another rail from a tunnel on his right to another on his left. Then his eyes drifted to the destination that made him smile beneath his gas mask; a station platform. Within a few minutes the train was slowing down, ready to allow its' single, somewhat train sick passenger to disembark.

" *Now arriving at-"*

A sudden burst of static interrupted the angelic voice as the train came to a gradual halt beside the platform. Shephard levered himself up from his bench - having been reluctant to do so until the train had come to a complete stop - and walked to the automatic door. At least, he *assumed* it was automatic, since it had closed behind him earlier and didn't have any obvious door handle or control pad near it. But nevertheless, the door didn't open. He took a step back, and another one forward, thinking that the sensors were probably broken.

The door didn't open.

With a low growl, Shephard went about crawling through the door, since there weren't any windows blocking his way. In fact, none of the trains seemed to have windows, which made Shephard a little curious about the mortality rate of a place like Black Mesa. It seemed like it was a death-trap long before alien monsters started making their way in. With a few more stumbles and curses, Shephard managed to clamber awkwardly through the top gap of the door, falling forward and ending up on his back.

He closed his eyes and managed a sighed 'fuck' before heaving himself to his feet and walking to the exit of the platform, shaking his head at how foolish this place was making him look. Part of him was glad none of his fellow soldiers were here to see it. As soon as he

took one step forward, the door to the train opened smugly behind him. He looked back to the offending exit with a scowl. If trains could smirk…

He tightened his grip on the red and rusted grey wrench in his gloved hand before turning again. Another few steps, and the already familiar noise of a teleportation event sounded behind him. Shephard whirled around with the wrench, easily catching the brown alien in the bottom of the jaw (which happened to be its' mouth), sending teeth and yellow-green blood spraying as it fell backwards.

Another teleportation, this one from the train. Shephard looked up to see it stood on the roof of the train, and it only took a few seconds to take in the tableau before it before green electricity began to gather between its' spindly hands. Kneeling, Shephard picked up the unconscious body of the alien before him, and, with technique and strength honed by years of training - not mention some natural talent - tossed the body at the other creature just as it fired.

Yellow blood exploded out of the body of the creature as the electricity pumped into it, slamming it back into the wall behind Adrian. The alien on top of the train did not look happy. Shephard turned and ran to the exit, entering a room with two vending machines on the left. A security guard - this one, too, was overweight - had a hand through the smashed glass of one of the vending machines, struggling to snake his arm up to reach the appropriate snack. When he noticed Shephard staring at him, he seemed to blush in embarrassment for a moment before finally deciding that he was proud of what he was doing.

"Hey, you wouldn't happen to have a quarter I could borrow, would ya?"

Shephard felt like responding with a very loud 'What the fuck is the matter with you?' but instead opted to be a bit more concise.

"There's a very angry alien coming around the corner."

The security guard seemed a little put out by this information, and reluctantly removed his arm from the broken vending machine.

"All righty," he sighed, slipping a Desert Eagle pistol from his hip holster. He walked past Shephard, gun dangling idly by his side. They way he moved it was like his nagging wife had asked him to take a spider out of the bath. As he reached the entrance, the alien turned the corner. Before it even had a chance to register the porky threat in front of it, the security guard had raised his weapon and blasted a sizeable hole in its' head.

After a quick blow on the barrel, the guard put it away again and returned to the vending machine, merely offering a wink to Shephard by way of acknowledgement.

The HECU soldier watched the security guard for a few moments before his newfound ally spoke up again.

"I suppose you're all about getting out of here, aren't ya?"

He sounded extremely put upon.

Shephard just nodded, not sure what words would add to this conversation just yet.

"All righty," he sighed again, abandoning the vending machine with one last loving glance. "I guess I have a better chance of surviving with you, anyway. You a soldier?"

"What else would I be?"

The guard laughed. "True enough, buddy. True enough." He extended a hand. "Anyway, name's Otis."

He hesitated for a moment before responding, but eventually reached out and grasped the hand. "Adrian Shephard."

Otis looked him up and down, bushy moustache twitching from side to side. "You a Corporal?"

Shephard nodded. "How did you know?"

"Meh," he offered, shrugging. "I know my military stuff. Tried out once, ya know. It, uh…" He scratched behind his ear and avoided Shephard's gaze. "It didn't work out so well." Suddenly, he snapped back to reality, smiling at Shephard. "Anyway, let's get goin', huh?"

The balding security guard moved to the stairs opposite with such assurance, Shephard almost didn't say anything.

Almost.

"Do you know where you're going?"

"Nope. But that's the only way we *can* go, so… that's the way we go."

Shephard couldn't say much to that, and so just settled for a silent nod and followed along.

A zombified security guard awaited them around the corner, but Otis took care of it faster than Shephard could react. So that made the possibility of him knocking the obese security guard out and taking his weapon all the more difficult. Not that Shephard *would*, but he needed to be prepared for the eventuality that the guard might turn on him. Who knows? That other security guard, Clancy, had said there were rumours that the military weren't there to rescue the people in the facility.

But if that wasn't the case, there was only one other explanation, and it didn't sit well with Shephard. The whole idea of 'eliminating witnesses' had always stank of bureaucratic nonsense to him, and he had always wondered what he would do when faced with a direct order. What wins out? Duty or morality?

Fortunately for him, it was a dilemma he had never been forced to confront. But now, the odds were getting higher and higher that he might have to make a decision like that before the day was done. He

tried not to think about it and focused on the task at hand. But right now, Otis was pretty much obliterating any competition that came their way. A zombie and five of those head-sucking things had attacked them by the time they reached a locked door, and Otis had blasted away each and every one of them.

The corridor leading to the locked automatic door had no light to speak of, but Shephard could make out scorch marks where the light fixtures would have been. He guessed that it was probably the work of one of those electricity aliens. A window on the corridor wall beside him displayed the room beyond, and Shephard could make out the helmeted silhouette of a security guard along with a scientist beside him. At least, Shephard assumed it was a scientist. Even with his infrared goggles active, he couldn't see much through the safety glass before him. Otis peeked through the window with him, cupping his hands over his eyes as he pressed his face to the glass.

"Shouldn't we-?"

Shephard put up a silencing finger. They were saying something.

"Have you seen the new IG88?" the guard asked inside asked idly, sounding bored as hell.

The scientist with him, who was sat on a swivelling chair with his back to a desk, shook his head. "No, I haven't. But a friend of mine-"

A sudden burst of green light off to the left distracted them. Whatever it was, it was stood just behind the locked door on Shephard's left.

"What's going on?" Otis asked, trying his best to press his face further into the glass and see around the corner.

The security guard was having a similar reaction. "What the h… what the hell is that, doc?"

"I don't know. I've never seen that species before…" the scientist replied as he got out of his chair, sounding so curious is made

Shephard angry. How can people in so much danger be so stupid?

The unseen creature emitted a series of whirrs and buzzes that sounded like an alien language, but Shephard couldn't be sure. It could just as easily have been a mating call. A football sized bolt of energy sprang out from the creature, hitting the security guard in the stomach. Blood spattered out from behind him, spraying on the wall. The guard lost none of his vigour as he whipped out his handgun.

"Don't worry, sir, I can take him!"

Another blue bolt hit him in the head, silencing him. He fell back against the wall behind him peacefully.

The creature made its' move, bounding over to the scientist. Shephard couldn't make much of it out other than the fact that it had two legs, four arms and a head that seemed to extend from its' chest. It intercepted the scientist as he made a desperate lunge for the window Shephard and Otis looked through.

"No! I don't want to die!"

Clawed hand wrapped around him, pulling him close before a burst of green energy teleported them away again. The glass in front of them smashed instantly, and they both put up their arms in front of their faces instinctively. When no cutting pain sliced into his arms, Shephard lowered them, and saw that the glass had simply fallen limply to the ground, as though dropped from some great height.

Without waiting to see if Otis was okay, Shephard climbed through the broken window frame, walking over to the fallen security guard. After a quick check that the guard was in fact dead, Shephard scooped up his Glock handgun, taking any ammunition and slipping it onto the clips onto his belt.

"Those poor bastards…"

He looked around at Otis, who had since managed to make his way into the room. He was looking at the dead body beside Shephard. Suddenly feeling like he was intruding, Shephard got to his feet and walked to the corridor beyond, letting Otis do whatever he needed to do. He watched as the security guard knelt by his fallen brother-in-arms and closed his eyes with his hand. Shephard felt a little ashamed for not doing so himself.

The bald guard stood up, and after a heavy sigh, he walked to where Shephard was waiting, pistol clutched firmly in his right hand while his wrench dangled from the other.

"I'm sorry."

Otis just nodded. "Let's keep moving, I think."

Shephard nodded right back at him, this time feeling a little more confident about leading the way now that he was armed with something more than a wrench and a knife. They turned a corner to the left, ending up in a far better lit corridor with a platform at the far end. It was at the bottom of a shaft that extended diagonally up in front of them, a control panel erected at the side of the platform confirming that it was an elevator of some sort.

They stepped on and activated it. Surprisingly, there were no glitches, and it took them up without a hitch. The sound of submachine gun fire from the room above made them duck down together, weapons at the ready.

When the noises stopped, Shephard didn't feel much better. Eventually they reached the top, and one of the brown electricity aliens awaited them, one dead beside. Two soldiers lay dead in front of it, their weapons scorched and useless. Without so much as a nod to each other, Shephard and Otis opened fire on the creature, ripping it apart with bullets.

They stopped to take a breath.

"Soldiers," Otis said, nodding to the bodies around them. "Looks like we're getting close to reinforcements, I'd say."

Shephard tended to agree with that assessment.

An automatic door in front of them stubbornly refused to open, and after some looking around, Shephard saw an air vent beside them above a HEV charging station. Finding that his PCV was still at 15, Shephard charged it up until the station ran out of power, putting the PCV at a much safer 62.

Satisfied, he smashed open the cover of the vent with his wrench and clambered inside. After crawling forward a few metres, he had to stop and wait for Otis to struggle into the vent. He tried to resist the urge to make any jokes. Around his fellow soldiers that kind of joking was one thing, but this was a security guard who could put a high powered bullet up his ass with a Desert Eagle. So he stayed quiet.

After crawling around a few corners, Shephard smashed his way through another vent, bringing them to the other side of the locked door and into a storage room. Sunlight shone in through a window in front of him, and, after dropping down with nary a whisper, Shephard walked over to it. He was greeted by the most beautiful sight he had ever seen.

An Osprey, waiting patiently for its' cargo of evacuating soldiers in the courtyard below. Otis walked up beside him and smiled, nodding approvingly to Shephard.

"Our way home, eh?"

Shephard nodded and led the way through a green door, the simplicity of just a doorknob seeming somehow strange to him. In the next room, a Sergeant sat at a desk, talking into a microphone attached to a radio.

"Come in, Cooper. Do you copy? Forget about Freeman; we're abandoning the base. If you have any last bomb targets mark them

on the technical map. Otherwise, get the *hell out of there* ." He spotted Shephard as he walked around the Sergeant's chair, and nodded in greeting. "Repeat, we are pulling out and commencing air strikes. Give us targets or get below." He released the button beneath the microphone and stared at it for a few seconds before heaving himself to his feet and looking over at the soldier and his security guard companion.

"Shephard. You've made it," he said, smiling.

"It's good to be here, sir."

The Sergeant looked over at Otis, who was busy staring out of the window at the Osprey below.

"I take it you didn't find Freeman?"

Shephard frowned. "Who's Freeman?"

His superior waved a dismissive hand. "Forget about it, Corporal; we are pulling out. The air strike has started. Get to the hangar while we await evac."

Although he wanted to know more about whoever Freeman was, Shephard simply nodded. Now wasn't the time to start pissing off superior officers. With a light tap on the shoulder, Shephard indicated to Otis to follow him through the next door, leading them into a room with a stairwell off to the left. However, a soldier stood on the opposite side of the room at the entrance to a storage closet had grabbed Otis' attention. A bald scientist with a thin moustache stood quivering in the doorway, hands up in a permanent surrender before the bulky soldier towering over him.

"Where's Freeman? We don't have time to mess around here!"

Breathless, the scientist swallowed loudly before responding, eyes firmly locked on the SPAS 12 shotgun being pressed into his belly. "Please believe me. Freeman could be anywhere!"

"I'm not letting you go until you talk!" With that, the goatee sporting soldier shoved the rifle into the scientist, winding him and knocking him on his back.

Otis rushed over, putting himself between the scientist and the soldier.

"Hey now, just back off. He doesn't know where this Freeman guy is."

The soldier looked Otis up and down, turning his rifle on him. Getting a tense feeling in the pit of his stomach, Shephard started making his way over.

"Do you really think I'm going to believe anything *you* say? You're all in this together, as far as I'm concerned."

"Look, now," the security guard said, looking like he was about to explode with anger despite the shotgun poking into his chest. "You've got no right to start accusing and beating up these people just because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time. It's not right."

The soldier stared at him incredulously for a moment before snorting derisively and returning to the scientist, apparently to continue his interrogation. Otis slapped a hand down on his shoulder.

"I don't think you understood, buddy. I said 'back off'-"

A quick elbow to his gut from the soldier interrupted him, making him double over and back up. He reached for his Desert Eagle, and the soldier spotted the move.

Shephard sprinted at Otis, letting his wrench drop to the floor. "No!"

With quicker reflexes than the security guard would ever have been able to manage, the soldier blasted Otis, the pellets tearing through his head and plastering blood all against the walls behind him.

Shephard collapsed to one knee beside the fallen guard. The scientist in the storage closet began whimpering loudly as he backed up. The soldier's turned his rifle on him.

"Shut up! Shut the fuck up right now!"

Teeth clenched, Shephard pulled Otis' Desert Eagle from his loose hand and pointed it at the soldiers' head, the red dot of the laser pointer distracting him from the scientist.

"Step off, soldier."

His eyes were wide in a mix of shock and rage. "What are you doing?"

"I said step off! Right now!"

"You're going to kill me for one of them?" he said, nodding to Otis' dead body with such a look of disgust it made Shephard want to pull the trigger right there and then.

The sergeant burst through the door at the other end of the room. "What the hell are you doing, Corporal?"

"That's just what I was asking him," the soldier asked, the red laser quivering against the bandana on his forehead.

"Sergeant, this soldier used excessive force on a civilian," Shephard said, his eyes never leaving the soldier. When he said 'civilian', the soldier sneered, and Shephard tightened his grip on the trigger.

"Corporal," the Sergeant said slowly, walking towards him with a steady, confident pace, "our orders here are containment. Do you understand me? Containment."

Shephard understood all too well. It was exactly what he was afraid of. The will to fight for Otis' death suddenly left him, and Shephard let his arm drop.

The Sergeant nodded. "Get below. Now."

He nodded only slightly, the gesture barely registering past the gas mask and helmet. "Yes, sir," he said, his gaze firmly set down in front of him.

Shephard quietly walked to the stairway, picking up his wrench as he went and trying to avoid the glares of his fellows. Down below was a garage area that led out into the courtyard where the Osprey sat waiting for him. At least he was going home. With a long breath in, Shephard straightened his back and walked to the exit. A metal door was half closed over the archway of the exit, and he guessed that he would probably have to duck in order to get underneath.

As he approached it, however, the door began to descend. Panicking, he dropped both the Desert Eagle and the wrench as he ran for it. He dropped to the ground in a forward slide, but it was too late. The door slammed down with a haunting finality.

Shephard watched through a small window in the metal door as soldiers from inside the complex poured into the Osprey. Wasting no time, he ran back the way he had come, heading for the stairway. He ran straight into a red steel fire door. There was no way he would move it. Desperation fuelling him, he ran back to the window. The Sergeant and soldier from upstairs ran to the Osprey, apparently having gone a different way that they hadn't told him about.

He slammed his fist against the window. "Hey! Hey! I'm in here! Hey! I'm-"

All the noise he could muster suddenly left him like air from a balloon. A figure he had seen before stepped directly in front of the window. The man in the suit looked in at him, his small smile completely devoid of humanity. He turned and walked out of sight.

"You sick fuck! Get back here! Let me out!" He slammed his fist against the glass. "Let me out!"

The Osprey began to take off.

"No! No, I'm right here! Shit! Shit!"

A mix of desperation, anger and fear filled him as he hit the window again and again, alternating between fists before finally pulling out his handgun and unloading an entire clip into the thick glass.

They barely did anything.

He just stood for a few moments, breathing heavily as he watched the Osprey disappear from view through the frayed glass. Closing his eyes, he rested his head against the door.

"Shit…"

The sound of a teleportation behind him quickly jarred him back to reality, and he turned to face whatever it was that had just arrived, weapon at the ready. He cursed loudly when he saw that the pistol was empty, the contents having just been fruitlessly emptied into the window.

The electricity alien in front of him didn't notice that the weapon was unloaded, and batted it out of Shephard's grip with a clawed hand. He looked into the creature's red eyes, and something inside him snapped. He caught the creature in the side of the face with a right hook, making it stumble back. Keeping on it, Shephard stormed forward, grasping both sides of the head and bringing it down into his knee.

Shephard let go of the head, letting it fall to the ground with a cry. It slammed its' hands together, charging up a blast of electricity. He stamped a boot down on the creature's neck, breaking it with a resounding snap that echoed around the garage. Not once looking back, Shephard picked up the weapons he had discarded around the room, reloading and putting away his Glock while taking the Desert Eagle and wrench with him.

Two more of the aliens appeared, one making a wall explode behind it with its' teleportation. With the Desert Eagle, however, they were barely a nuisance.

Walking over to the hole in the wall, Shephard saw that there was enough room for him to clamber inside, and he did so. There was only enough space for him to shimmy along sideways between two walls, a heating pipe beneath his boots making his feet sweat. Eventually he reached the end of the corridor and stepped out into a slightly wider corridor going off to his left and his right. The piercing noise of hissing steam echoed down to him.

Fuck, he hated men in suits.

(A/N: You know what I've found? A lot of *Opposing Force* is unashamed filler. There's so many locked doors or blocked passageways that make you go back and turn some crank or flip some switch before going *all the way* back to the door. So fans of the game might find a few puzzles missing here and there. I've done the same for *Blue Shift* and *Half-Life* as well, since puzzles just aren't that interesting to write or read about. For me, anyway.

Next Chapter: Surface Tension.

And it's long.)

Surface Tension

-1Disclaimer: I don't own *Half-Life.*

(A/N: hhgbh is a life-saver. Well, maybe not a *life* -saver, but still… there's far more work involved in beta-ing my stories than anyone should do for free.)

The Black Mesa Incident

Chapter Twenty Two: Surface Tension

Gordon barely had a chance to release his finger from the button before Kaufman had leapt through the opening gap in the giant doors before them. A shaft of sunlight blasted through, widening across the concrete floor as the doors moved aside. A voice that was decidedly un-Kaufman-like managed a yelped 'What the hell?' before Gordon heard two successive and rather painful sounding cracks.

What Gordon found out was a hapless soldier slumped to the floor as he stepped through the doors and out onto the road beyond. Slanted walls of rock stretched out on either side of them before curving back together into a natural tunnel some yards ahead. Sandbag shields and gleaming metallic barrels lay in random piles on either side of the road leading up to said tunnel.

The soldier was well and truly out for the count, his nose crushed and bleeding profusely over his face. Gordon could see some blood on the butt of Kaufman's rifle where he had struck it against the young man's face. Without looking around, Kaufman turned the rifle around and brought the muzzle around to point at the unconscious form below him.

Panic in his eyes, Gordon dashed over, hand outstretched to land on the security guard's shoulder.

"Wait-"

The gunshot rang through the miniature valley, making Gordon wince and duck his head.

Kaufman turned back to him irritably. "What? You squeamish?"

If he was truthful, he was, but that wasn't the reason behind Gordon's panic.

"That's a very loud gun," he said, pointing to it with the tip of the Tau Cannon.

His newfound comrade frowned at him like he was speaking in Cantonese. "A loud-" He looked down at the gun, and his eyes widened. His gaze whipped back up to look at Gordon.

"Crap."

" *Shit! We got hostiles!"*

The radio-crackling voice made them both look to the mouth of the tunnel. Four soldiers emerged. The one on the furthest right spotted their fallen comrade, and pointed the body out to his friends.

They didn't seem too pleased about it, funnily enough.

Without pause, the one in the middle (who wore a red beret) angled his M4 up towards the air and let loose from the grenade launcher. Gordon and Kaufman leapt away from each other in opposite directions, the grenade hitting the ground between them in mid-jump. The blast tossed Gordon in a wider arch than he would have thought possible through the air before colliding roughly with the slanted 'wall' on the left hand side of the road. The Tau leapt from his grip as he hit the rock, rattling as it bounced in a way that made Gordon wince.

Or the wincing might have been because of the explosion. Either way, Gordon was wincing as he pushed himself to his feet, gasping for air. He straightened his glasses as he knelt behind a pile of

sandbags. Kaufman was already on his feet, firing in quick bursts before ducking back behind his own personal sandbag cover.

Cautiously, Gordon peeked over the top. Two of the four soldiers fired relentlessly at Kaufman, apparently having identified him as the threat due to his having a gun. Either they weren't aware that he was the 'Freeman' they were looking for, or they thought he was dead.

Or, perhaps they knew the truth. They knew he was a scientist who had *absolutely no idea* what he was doing.

If so, he was well and truly doomed.

Some of the barrels randomly placed around the various sandbags bore a yellow flammable symbol on the front. He quickly glanced over at the body of the soldier behind him just as he heard a grunt from one of their several opponents. Kaufman had managed to catch one of the soldiers directly in the forehead, knocking him back to the ground. Despite their training which Gordon assumed would have taught them to do otherwise, the soldiers took a few moments to register the death of their comrade, ceasing their relentless attack for at least a few seconds.

Gordon always knew when a gift horse was looking him in the mouth, and he launched himself forward towards the body of the soldier beside the door, eliciting a confused look from Kaufman as he leant against his sandbag, reloading. The soldiers resumed their firing upon noticing the orange blur of Gordon's passing HEV suit.

" *Squad! We got Freeman!"*

He came to a skidding halt beside the body of the soldier, kicking up dust like a baseball player. Frantically, he searched over the soldier's body. He heard Kaufman shout something, but his words were outmatched by the din of their enemies' weapons. The words 'out of' and 'bullets' somehow made it to Gordon, however, and he hastened his search. Finally, he found the object he coveted; a grenade.

Without pause, he turned and ran in a crouching position to where Kaufman had taken cover. The words 'what the hell' were just barely out of the security guard's mouth before Gordon pulled the pin of the grenade and turned to the very edge of the sandbag. He tossed the grenade around, and watched it skittle along the ground from his cautious observation point.

It rolled to an achingly long stop against some explosive barrels just beside the soldiers. Gordon turned back around and firmly pressed his back to the sandbag, slapping his hands over his ears. Kaufman, having long since learned to listen to Gordon's hunches, followed suit.

The explosion still left Gordon's ears ringing. He felt clumps of mud and dirt pattering against his back, and looked up to see a cloud of dust floating over them. Slowly (and, he couldn't help noticing, far quicker than Kaufman), Gordon got to his feet and peeked his head over the top of the sandbag.

No soldiers. Gordon stood up fully, spotting the gleam of the somehow still shiny Tau cannon in the middle of the road. Keeping a continual eye on the scorched sandbag the soldiers had taken refuge behind during the fire fight, Gordon walked over to the experimental device and scooped it up. After checking over it for damage (although he admittedly had no idea what it was supposed to look like when it was *working*, let alone broken), he made his way towards the sandbag.

He paused at the edge of the sandbag before darting around it. Four dead soldiers lay spread out across the road, and Gordon wondered how it was that he didn't spot them as soon as he got up. Small articles of clothing on each of the soldiers sported small, flickering flames, their skin brown and nauseating to look at.

"Christ," Kaufman breathed, although his horror still didn't stop him from making his way to each soldier and taking whatever ammunition they held.

Gordon decided to occupy himself with moving forward, which had become somewhat of a crutch for him in these difficult times. As long as he always had somewhere to get to and some ultimate goal to attain, he would be all right. That way he could put all of his emotions aside and deal with what needed to be done. What the hell he would do once this was all over and he had time to think about it…

Well, no need to think about that.

He exited the 'tunnel' out to the other side. After a slow ramp down in front of him, the road made a sharp turn to the left. Gordon crept forward, keeping his head down and keeping the Tau pointed forward. The road ran over the width of a dam. A control tower was erected out of the water on the right hand side was connected to the dam by a secure looking stone walkway. A chain link fence - which Gordon assumed was used for filtering purposes) nixed the idea of simply hopping in the way and swimming up the river to safety. It was on the far end of the dam, and even further on, Gordon could see another sandbag wall just in front of a red secure access fire door. Some great contraption had been built behind it, but Gordon couldn't begin to guess what it was for.

It looked distinctly militaristic, so he just went with the assumption that explosions were involved.

The steady noise of helicopter blades whipping through the air brought his gaze upwards, and he saw a camo green helicopter thunder overhead. Kaufman came up beside him, pulling back some final catch on his rifle with a loud clack.

"How did they know your name?"

Gordon wasn't really listening, his attention focused on trying to see around the rock face behind which they hid. Right now, he couldn't see what was on the left hand side of the dam.

"What?"

"The soldiers. They know your name. How?"

He shrugged. "Don't know. Looked me up in the database, I suppose."

"But *why* would they want your name in the first place?" Kaufman was sounding impatient now.

His thoughts straying from his immediate survival, Gordon turned to his comrade. "Because I've killed a lot of soldiers today."

"You?"

Gordon's lips thinned into a line. "Well… you saw," he said simply, nodding to the tunnel behind them.

This didn't seem satisfactory to Kaufman. "Yeah, but… you have no idea what you're doing!"

Gordon threw his hand up in the air and rolled his eyes in a 'Finally! Someone gets it!' gesture.

"So… you've killed how many soldiers by now?"

The scientist in him took over as he catalogued and counted the deaths he was responsible for today.

"Nearly twenty."

" *Twenty!* And those were all by accident?"

"… mostly."

"Do you have *any* training?"

"I took the Hazard Course."

"How many times?"

"Five. No, six. I only finished it once."

Kaufman's eyes nearly popped out of his head. "You-" After his disbelieving outburst was met by a slightly bored stare from Gordon, the security guard just shook his head. "Never mind. Let's just go."

The security guard, looking slightly dejected, got up and walked forward. Gordon reached out a hand to grab his arm.

"Don't-"

Something hit the wall on their right and exploded, knocking Kaufman out of Gordon's grip and onto the road on the dam.

So that was what it was. A cannon. Gordon felt a small tinge of satisfaction at his correct assumption. His thoughts quickly went back to Kaufman, and he figured that he should at least try to help him. With an annoyed grunt, Gordon scrambled around the corner and ran towards the left hand side of the dam. A shocked but still conscious Kaufman was hauling himself to his feet a little bit further down the road, his weapon lost somewhere along the way. Gordon could see the security guard watching him as he ran to the edge and leapt clean over it.

Much to Gordon's surprise and relief, there was water on this side. He tossed away the Tau cannon and held on to his glasses as he tumbled silently through the air. While he could retrieve the Tau cannon later, he didn't want to have to start a swimming search for his glasses while a helicopter rained hellfire all over him. And somehow he didn't trust Kaufman to help him right now.

The water was offensively, *incredibly* cold. He still managed to keep a grip on his glasses, however, and got his bearings after a few seconds of completely futile flailing. First, he came up to get some air. As he did so, he heard a loud scream, quickly followed by a splash beside him as Kaufman landed, seemingly sinking like a stone. The water splashing on Gordon's face tipped his glasses awkwardly, and he scowled as he straightened them.

They stayed completely straight when he leapt off a dam, but some splashing water? Oh, dear God, of *course not* .

The security guard came back up a few moments later, gasping for air.

"Christ, that's cold!"

Gordon nodded, once again not listening to his companion. His eyes were cast to the dark blue below him, searching for the probably quickly sinking Tau cannon. Finally, he spotted a gleam beneath the water, and dove down to fetch it. After swimming so far down it made his ears hurt, Gordon scooped up the weapon and hoped that it didn't react badly to water as he swam back up.

He burst from the water in a similar manner to Kaufman earlier. Despite the danger, Gordon felt content enough to simply float there and catch his breath before continuing on, helicopter be damned.

"Okay," Kaufman gasped, "I think I saw a ledge with a ladder over there." He nodded over to his right, and Gordon followed his gaze. Surely enough, there was a stone ledge with a handy-dandy ladder for easy access. As he got closer to it, Gordon could make out a small pipe, barely bigger than the air vents he had become so acquainted with in the past 24 hours. It was red lit, which always seemed to put Gordon on edge. Gripping the Tau a little bit tighter, Gordon went first.

Just as he reached the mouth of the pipe, Gordon looked over to Kaufman.

"Do you want to go in first?"

"Well, yeah. If I could have that," he said, pointing to the Tau with a soggy finger.

"Um… no." Gordon had no idea why he was feeling so possessive about it. A few hours ago he would have been happy to hand over

the reigns of responsibility to someone else. He wondered what had changed in the meantime.

Kaufman seemed irritated by the dismissal, but dealt with it. "Then no."

Gordon just nodded, and crawled inside.

It was a strange experience, crawling with someone behind him. It got Gordon thinking about what the soles of his boots looked like. Were there grips on them? Were they flat? Or did that have strange suction cup like things for a better hold in hazardous areas?

One of many things he noted he would have to find out when he got a moment to himself.

The pipe brought them out on a barely present concrete ledge, looking down on a sandy floor some feet below. High enough to break someone into many, many pieces if they fell, HEV suit or not. The wall from which they had emerged was a light grey concrete that towered above them even now. In a lucky bit of placement, there was a red ladder on Gordon's immediate right leading up to the ledge above. As awkward as it was, Gordon managed to delicately balance the Tau on three fingers while he gripped the rungs with the other hand and with his pinkie.

After much grunting and groaning (the latter mostly coming from Kaufman), they reached the ledge and clambered onto the sandy ground that awaited them. A few large rocks provided a makeshift archway for them, protecting them from the invasive helicopter's prying eyes.

Said flying vehicle of death flew over them with alarming speed, making Gordon twitch from where he sat against a rock face. The Tau lay beside him, and Gordon liked to think that it was enjoying the break from the action as well. And besides, he wanted the thing to dry off. He didn't want to open fire and find the thing blowing up in his face. If he had bothered to put on the HEV helmet, then he probably

wouldn't have minded. But as it was, his head was a valuable commodity.

Kaufman, crouching at the mouth of the archway, looked back to him.

"You ready to go again? If you want I could scout ahead with that-" he turned and went for the Tau, but Gordon scooped it up.

"I've got it." He hefted himself to his feet and led the way towards the exit and onto the sandy field ahead. He paused as he passed Kaufman. "Thank you."

Even though he was certain he saw something twitch on the security guard's face, Gordon continued on. Before them was a sandy expanse, roughly the size of a playground. The wall of rock that surrounded the expanse barely reached about ten feet into the air, but there were plenty of nooks and crannies on the left-hand side to hide an annoying amount of soldiers. A watchtower in the far right corner extended up to the sky importantly, or at least Gordon assumed it was important. Just in front of where he assumed the entrance to the tower was, three large rocks erected in a Stonehenge fashion blocked his view. On the left almost next to him he could see a wooden sign that read 'STORM DRAIN HATCH'. The painted arrow beneath it pointed to a gap in the wall of random rocks that spread across the left hand side of the expanse before him.

"Could be a lot of soldiers," Kaufman said, vocalising Gordon's thoughts. "Maybe you should let me take that and I'll take them out."

Gordon shook his head. "It's all right. Besides, I'm faster." He went ahead, but stopped when the security guard's hand clamped down on his armoured shoulder.

"You listen to me, you little-"

Instead of the fear he was expecting, Gordon felt some irritation as he whirled around to face the security guard, glowering at him. What

the hell was wrong with this man? Did he want the Tau cannon that bad, or was this something personal? Either way, Gordon wished his companion would just put it aside until they were out of this mess alive. Wasn't that what mattered now? Survival?

"I've got it. Thank you."

Gordon hoped there was enough emphasis on the right words to give the security guard the picture. Without so much as a second glance, Gordon turned around and headed out from the safe haven of the rocky archway. A part of him expected bullets to riddle the ground as soon as he took one step onto the sand. When nothing happened, he continued on, his feet sinking slightly with each step into the surprisingly deep sand.

He kept to the left hand wall, edging his way around the expanse and past the entrance to where the storm drain hatch resided. He could feel the look of confusion and impatience from Kaufman, but he didn't care. As far as he was concerned, he had more experience with these people right now. Besides, from here, he had a better idea of where he was going. Over the rock wall opposite him, Gordon could see a tall white wall with barbed fencing running along the top, a menacing watchtower erected on the far right corner, probably for the helipad area on the other side. There wasn't a soldier inside the tower, but Gordon didn't think that would last long, and so increased his shimmying speed along the wall.

He brought the Tau up to bear as he reached the first indentation in the rock big enough to house a soldier. After a few silent counts, Gordon whirled around, experimental weapon at the ready. The soldier's cigarette fell from his mouth just in time for Gordon to hit him dead centre in the chest with the cannon. The blast drove him into the wall, propping him up in the cracked indentation he had created. Blood seeped down from behind his head and down onto his shoulder.

" *Squad! Neutralise!"*

Gordon turned to the expanse and saw three soldiers bunched around the Stonehenge shape in front of the tower. Now that he was side on, he could see the entirety of the n-shaped formation. Two soldiers took cover on the left hand side, one on the right. He took cover in the shadowy nook, pressing his back to the wall. After a few more silent counts, Gordon pointed the Tau at the left column. One of the soldiers took cover behind the rock and quickly got a rude shock as the laser blast travelled effortlessly through it, leaving nary a trace.

The other soldier had leapt away when Gordon had fired, but it didn't take the scientist long to get him in his sights and blast him away too.

And then there was one.

He poked his head out around the corner. The soldier was still taking cover behind the right column, but was firing so wildly in Gordon's direction that he dared not burst around the corner and fire on him for fear of a bullet through the glasses.

Suddenly, the firing stopped, and, after a few seconds silence, Gordon decided to brave the slightly more frightening lack of noise and whipped around the corner, bringing the Tau around in a far too slow arc.

"Whoa! Just me!"

Kaufman stood beside the unconscious soldier, his hands up.

Gordon pushed aside the temptation to say or do anything that might piss off the security guard, so he instead just nodded and walked to the tower. There was no door, just a bare doorway. He stepped inside the grey structure and smiled when he saw the crank inside, the rusting sign above it reading 'STORM DRAIN HATCH'. Doing it Kaufman's way, they would have reached the hatch and ended up having to fight their way back again.

He turned the crank as far to the left as it could go, going with something that Barney had always said about these things;

" *Lefty Loosey, Righty Tighty."*

Hopefully that incredibly wise axiom applied to Storm Drain Hatches.

He took one step outside when Kaufman launched himself inside the small room, the death rattle of a helicopter machinegun following him in. Missiles quickly followed, exploding around the entrance. By some incredibly far-fetched stroke of luck, none of the offending projectiles entered the small room.

"There's no way," Kaufman gasped, "to get to the hatch. We'll have to wait it out."

A cocked eyebrow was the only response Gordon gave, since the muttered sarcastic retort he had in mind would only make the situation worse. Without a word, Gordon dove out into the field, running to the Stonehenge shape and taking cover. The helicopter was flying over the opposite side of the field - precisely where the drain hatch was.

He pulled back the trigger of the Tau cannon and held it. The rectangular shape in the centre of the device began spinning, the entire device gyrating in his grip along with it. He leaned around the corner and watched as the helicopter banked and rotated around, coming back for another pass at its' comparatively tiny prey. His gaze returned to the cannon, which he was having trouble holding on to by this point.

Gordon closed his eyes and rested his head back against the rock. This was what his life had come down to. Hiding, moving quickly, shooting at the right time, and then hiding again. As lives went, he supposed it wasn't too hard. Not for him, anyway. It wasn't *fun*, by any means, but…

The helicopter got louder, and Gordon opened his eyes. Jaw set, he whirled around the corner and took aim. The mini-guns mounted on the helicopter's wings whirred loudly before they fired, the bullets kicking up a shockwave of sand as they worked their way up to him. Hoping his aim was good enough, Gordon released the trigger.

Blowback from the Tau tossed Gordon through the air and into the rocks behind him, knocking his glasses ajar on his face. By the time he readjusted them, he saw that the helicopter had lowered somewhat from it's previous altitude. It turned around and flew away from Gordon, plumes of black smoke spurting from the propeller.

He got to his feet and took aim again, charging the weapon while his enemies' back was turned.

More confident in his aim, Gordon fired just as Kaufman barrelled into him, knocking him to the ground and flinging the Tau from his grip. It rolled quietly along the sand and came to a blissful stop.

Gordon, his irritation nowhere near hidden, glared up at the man laying on top of him. When he saw the look on Kaufman's face, however, his irritation gave way to genuine fear, something he hadn't felt for some time.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing? You think because you've got this fancy suit," he said, slamming the butt of the rifle into the Lambda symbol on the HEV's chest, "and that crazy science weapon that you got the right to start killing soldiers?"

He turned the rifle around and pointed the nozzle in Gordon's face. "That's not your job! It's mine! Those scientists back in the lab thought they could do something too… but I showed them not to." His gaze drifted a little, and Gordon considered subtly reaching the crowbar on his hip. "A few bullets to the kneecaps and they were safe… they couldn't go anywhere and get themselves killed. It's my job… they'll be safe there…" He looked back down to Gordon, who was reconsidering the crowbar course of action. "… And you'll be safe here. Now Give me the weapon." Gordon didn't respond.

"NOW!"

Trying his utmost to keep his face neutral, Gordon stared up at Kaufman. "I can't."

"Bullshit. You give me that fucking weapon right now or I will blow your head right off, I swear to God."

"But *I can't."*

Kaufman slapped a random catch on the rifle. "Oh yeah?"

Gordon nodded. "Yeah."

"Why, huh? Some scientist technique to it that *I* wouldn't get? Is that it?"

"No. You're sitting on me."

At first, he did nothing. Kaufman just stared down at him, icy blue stare burning holes into Gordon as sweat trickled down the side of his head to drip onto the sand below. The sun was behind Kaufman's head, making him hard to see. Suddenly he laughed, and quickly got up. Gordon could breath again, and he sat up immediately.

Keeping his weapon trained on Gordon, Kaufman walked around to the Tau cannon. He tossed the rifle at Gordon and picked up the cannon with movements so quick Gordon barely got to his feet before Kaufman was pointing the prototype weapon at him.

"So how does this thing work?"

The relish on his eyes as he studied the weapon up and down made Gordon's sweat suddenly turn cold. He opened his mouth to reply when the helicopter roared up over the horizon, smoke still billowing from the top.

"How do I use it!?" Kaufman screamed at Gordon, panic quickly settling in.

In reply, Gordon lunged for it, latching onto the weapon with both hands. The helicopter continued to loom down on them. Baring his teeth like an animal, Kaufman turned Gordon with the Tau, slamming him back first into the wall and pressing into him.

"You scientist shit. You think you can do my job better than me!?"

Spittle appeared on Gordon's glasses. The helicopter came ever closer. Either Kaufman didn't notice, or didn't care.

Both options seemed pretty likely at this point.

Gordon met Kaufman's icy stare with one his own.

"I've been doing better than you so far."

Obviously, this was not the response Kaufman desired, because he looked ready to back up and smash the cannon into Gordon's face. A flash from the helicopter suddenly grabbed his attention, and he turned around to see it firing off one of the two missiles attached to its' right wing.

Gordon ran.

Kaufman did not.

Instead, he opted for trying to take out the missile with the Tau cannon, screaming at the top of his lungs as he fired fruitlessly.

Gordon didn't see the end result, but the force of the explosion behind him gave him the distinct impression that Kaufman didn't win. The blast knocked Gordon off his feet and onto the ground in front of him, skidding along the sand and burying his head beneath it. While he lay there, eyes closed and the sand surrounding him, Gordon wondered if anyone would notice if he just stayed here. He could just barely breath, and from a distance the orange of his suit would just look like rocks. The helicopter sounded like it was moving off, satisfied with having killed at least one of its' enemies.

So, really, there was nothing stopping him from just lying there.

Nothing.

Not a thing.

Gordon got to his feet, dusted himself off, and headed off to the dark passageway beside the storm drain hatch sign. He stopped at the entrance and looked back to where Kaufman had been standing. The remains of the Tau cannon were just visible amid the charred black spray pattern on the rocky wall. It was shattered into pieces. Gordon tried not to concentrate too much on finding Kaufman's remains.

He went through into the rock 'corridor', the walls bending away from him in either direction in a V shape. Gordon slipped his crowbar from his thigh as he approached the end of the corridor and it turned off to the left. One foot was barely out into the field beyond when Gordon froze.

The sign reading 'DANGER: MINES' with a black skull and crossbones painted hauntingly above it seemed like a good reason to freeze. He could see the opened Storm Drain Hatch, the door pivoted up to the sky and revealing the tunnel down enticingly. Cautiously, Gordon took a step forward.

When something moved underneath the sand in front of him, he quickly back-pedalled, pressing his back to the warm rock. Crowbar held up at the ready, Gordon extended his other arm out in front of him, palm open. Although a futile gesture, it somehow made him feel a little better.

A headcrab suddenly launched from underneath the sand. Without thinking, Gordon swung the crowbar around the smacked it directly in its' middle with the curved side. It flew like a baseball into the minefield, rolling along the sand quite peacefully before putting itself right way up again. After a little shake to reorient itself (although Gordon had little idea why, since it didn't have any eyes or ears), it

started for him again, slowly waddling towards him with its' front two claws raised up.

And then it exploded.

Gordon winced as the flash hit his eyes. All that remained of the headcrab was… well, nothing. His eyes went from the scorched crater where the mine had been, and then to the hatch.

He smiled.

The crater was just close enough for him to jump into. He sheathed his crowbar, timed his jump, and leapt into the crater. When he reached it, he whipped his crowbar up, waiting for another attack. This one came from behind, and he ducked underneath, striking the headcrab in the direction of the hatch. The football sized creature flailed around in the air before bouncing along he sandy ground towards the hole.

Gordon felt like he was watching a sport as the headcrab rolled towards the open hatch, almost falling in before it managed to scrabble some control back. Somehow, he it looked a little annoyed, and started for Gordon, stalking towards him just as the other headcrab had done.

Then, once again, a mine exploded beneath the creature, bursting it instantly.

Feeling somewhat more like a scientist now, Gordon estimated if the second crater was close enough to him, and also if it was close enough to the hatch. With a shrug, he just jumped for it. He landed on the crater with such momentum, he was forced to just continue onwards, leaping again at the hole. With painful speed, Gordon collided with the hatch and bounced back, hitting the ledge of the tunnel. He bounced forward and down the tunnel, managing to awkwardly latch on to the ladder leading into the tunnels below.

His crowbar clattered to the bottom of the chamber angrily, sounding somehow offended at having been dropped by its' owner. Unconcerned for the friction, Gordon slid down the rest of the ladder by gripping the sides and hopped off at the bottom. A grate in the entrance of the tunnel ahead of him hindered his progress. Gordon cocked an eyebrow and picked up the crowbar.

Oh dear. Whatever shall I do?

Relishing the idea of something non-living and incapable of fighting back to vent his frustrations on, Gordon demolished the innocent grate, smashing it far more than was really necessary. He crouched slightly and stepped inside the tunnel, allowing himself to get carried away by the rhythms and noises of travelling through a confined space. The crowbar stayed in his hand in case of anymore headcrabs. He was beginning to find these little interludes quite relaxing, actually. Someday he would be explaining this to a doctor while wrapped in a white jacket and it would seem admittedly strange. But right now, to Gordon, it made all the sense in the world.

Eventually, after a few twists and turns, the tunnel suddenly got smaller, and Gordon was reduced to crawling along on his belly. The blue sky on the other side pushed Gordon just that little bit faster, and he tried to ignore how damned awkward the crowbar was in such a tight space. He knew that the moment he started thinking bad thoughts towards the crowbar, that it would disappear and he would be left with just himself to survive.

Not a comforting prospect. So, for now, the crowbar was his best friend. Gordon reached the end of the tunnel and crawled out onto the ledge just below, having to drag himself out on his hands before his legs fell out. It was only as he stood up that he realised how close to death he had just come.

He was on an absolutely *miniature* ledge on a cliff face. And this wasn't just a cliff face. This was, as Barney would say, 'a mega cliff face'. So high up that it made him dizzy just glancing down. So high up that the trees below were barely visible. Good God, and he could

see an entire river. This was the highest up Gordon had ever been in his life. He squatted on the ledge, his back pressed into the wall so hard he thought he might break through. He hoped he would.

Gordon chanced a look down. There was a ledge below him that ran the entire cliff-face, or at least seemed to. It snaked around all of the indentations and crannies on the surface, eventually reaching out around the corner and out of Gordon's view. And, *of course,* that was where Gordon needed to go. With a shaky sigh that only made him feel worse, Gordon started looking for a way down.

Two jets roared past, making him press his back to the wall for another few minutes. After he was relatively sure that there would be no more sudden wind movements, he started lowering himself down the left hand side of the ledge. He landed ungraciously behind a unaware soldier who hadn't been visible from where Gordon had been standing. Alarmed by the thumping noise behind him, the soldier turned in time for Gordon to slice the crowbar up between his legs.

Barney would no doubt have cheered his using such a dirty move; he never was one for honour and all that when it came to a serious fight. The soldier grunted and almost doubled over, giving Gordon enough time to bring his crowbar back and around for another swing, hitting his opponent in the head and sending him falling off the ledge. Suddenly realising his need for another weapon, Gordon reached out for the soldier's falling rifle. He fell pretty short, and almost tumbled from the cliff himself.

For a few moments, he thought he might hyperventilate at having almost fallen down what felt like a bottomless chasm. He started to edge his way along the cliff-side, going around a U shaped bend before ending up at a rather sharp corner. When he went around, he instantly spotted the soldier stood at the far end, taking shelter beneath a small cavern in the cliff-face. The pathway Gordon was using ended there.

The soldier didn't spot him as he darted back around the corner, putting his back to the wall. He took a breath.

"Heyaauuaaauauaaa!"

What the statement lacked in coherence, Gordon was sure it made up for it with attention-grabbing power.

And surely enough, Gordon heard the footsteps of a cautious soldier approaching him. When he thought that his prey was close enough, Gordon swung around the corner, the crowbar in his left hand arching around with him. It collided with the soldier's rifle, pinning it to the wall. His enemy responded with a swift elbow to the face, hitting Gordon in the cheekbone. Gordon took one step back, wincing from the blow, but managed to recover with a swift swing of the crowbar into the soldier's arm. Not really thinking about what he was doing, Gordon gave the soldier a good shove off the cliff, reclaiming the embedded crowbar as his enemy fell.

Gordon scowled as he realised that was yet another semi-automatic rifle he had let escape. He really had to stop doing that.

He walked to the cavern where the soldier had been residing. Below him - far too below him to jump - was another ledge running around the cliff-face. But directly below him, a huge pipe the thickness of a truck trailer ran diagonally down into a blue square - Gordon assumed it was a transformer - roughly level with the pathway that was his goal. The pipe continued out of the bottom of the square and to ground level, countless miles below. A walkway ran around the blue square, linking to the pathway that ran along the cliff-side. The U shaped indentation in the cliff-face allowed the blue square to nestle inside quiet conveniently. For once Gordon was impressed with something in the Black Mesa Facility. So far it had all been pointless explosions and breaking down generators.

Although he still had no way down.

Bullets whizzed up past his face and hit the ceiling just above his head, a little cloud of dust puffing down onto his hair. Gordon looked down and saw a soldier vertically below him on the pathway, his rifle pointed up at him. It looked like he was taking cover beneath the pipe, unaware that Gordon had only a crowbar and a fancy science suit to his name at the moment.

That didn't stop him from firing though, and after a few more narrow misses, Gordon shrugged and threw himself onto the pipe. He managed to negotiate himself onto his back as he slid down, but that was about all he could control. The soldier's bullets followed him down, chipping uselessly at the thick concrete. Gordon hit the blue square feet first, the speed and impact tossing him forward heels over head onto the metal gantry. He landed on his back with a loud, echoing crash, the metal of the walkway not giving an inch.

" *Warning: major fracture detected. Seek medical attention."*

A low grumble escaped his lips and Gordon readjusted his glasses. The loud thumping of the soldier's boots spurred him to his feet, and Gordon turned to where the soldier was approaching from. Grasping the crowbar with both hands, he ran around the corner of the blue square and directly at the soldier, who was only just at the corner himself. With faster and better honed reflexes than Gordon could ever hope to have, the soldier grabbed the crowbar in midswing. A kick to Gordon's belly knocked him on his back, and the soldier pointed his rifle down at the scientist, dropping his crowbar to the floor.

His voice, like many of the other soldiers Gordon had come across, was distorted by his haunting gas mask.

"Finally got you, shithead."

Gordon grabbed the nozzle of the rifle and pulled it off to the side of his head, jamming it in the chain linked walkway they stood on. He kicked out with both legs, knocking the soldier back and off the walkway to his death. Shocked at the speed of the combat, Gordon

just sat there and breathed for a moment, allowing himself to lie back before doing anything else. The soldier's rifle stood upright out of the walkway, reminding Gordon that he had a job to do. Wearily, he grabbed the M4 and used it as a crutch to pull himself to his feet before prying it loose.

Sheathing his crowbar and holding the rifle in a manner he imagined looked professional, Gordon got off the walkway and onto the path, walking around the corner. He almost collided head on with another soldier, this one brandishing a shotgun. Panicking, Gordon backed up and fired before the soldier had a chance to do much of anything. The bullets shot through his unshielded face effortlessly, spreading blood against the walls behind him.

The gunfire continued for a little longer than was necessary before Gordon finally managed to calm himself down. The soldier was in a small cavern in the cliff-face, not unlike the one above. But this one had doors at the far end. As Gordon approached them, they opened automatically, and loudly. He stepped inside the small room beyond, and found some crates and what looked like a green pipe propped up on a green metal box. On closer inspection, Gordon realised it was a rocket launcher. Feeling somewhat excited at the size of explosion the weapon could create, Gordon crept towards it.

A helicopter roared past outside. Gordon realised that he must have tripped something when the doors opened. He heard missiles being fired and tucked himself into the small room as far as he could go. They exploded in the cavern, the flash just blinding him instead of burning. Having no wish to try his luck, Gordon picked up the rocket launcher and opened the green crate. White rockets lay inside. He scooped one up and inspected the rocket launcher. The flat end of the rocket looked like it went in the cup shape on the tip of the rocket launcher.

Gordon tried it, and was rewarded by a laser sight just beneath the nozzle nigh on blinding him. He turned the launcher towards the entrance to the cave, and stepped outside. The helicopter had its' back to him, but was turning. He aimed the laser onto the propeller

and fired. The kickback from the launch made him stumble, but he managed to keep the laser trained on target. It landed with a satisfying bang against the propellers, annihilating them. Somehow, a chain reaction was started, small explosions littering the helicopter as it fell before it finally blew up in midair.

Nothing could describe the satisfaction Gordon felt. He tossed the used launcher to the ground and picked up the M4 rifle. As much as he had enjoyed the explosive power, Gordon didn't trust himself not to end up blowing himself to pieces. So, machinegun it was. He exited the cave and went left, following the path around the cliff-face until he reached a ladder leading up to some hastily erected wooden platforms that linked to some jutting ledges above him.

After some climbing, shimmying and incredibly cautious walking, Gordon reached another pipe that led into the cliff-face. Thank God. Some solid ground again. More soldiers, yes but solid ground. He crouched to crawl inside, and a headcrab leapt out at him from the darkness. With no more alarm than someone swatting a fly, Gordon crushed it against the side of the pipe with the butt of his gun, green blood squirting out.

He crawled in past the dead creature and towards the red lights in the distance. The tunnel turned a few more times before sunlight from outside once more made Gordon squint as he made his way outside. Awkwardly, he crawled out hands first into ankle high water, the tunnel bringing him out into a neatly made maze of trenches. The top of the trench was far too high for him to climb up, so he continued onwards.

" *All quiet, sir."*

Gordon froze upon hearing the voice above him. Caution suddenly seemed the best course of action, and he proceeded forward at a snails pace, all too aware of the sloshing of the water around his feet. The trench split off in three directions in front of him like a crossroads. Using the old axiom about the shortest route between two places, Gordon went forward, eventually climbing into the tunnel

at the end of that trench. The tunnel continued onwards for a few more feet before first turning right, then left. It came to a sudden stop a few feet ahead, a red ladder leading to the open air above.

When he reached the ladder, Gordon just stood and grasped the rung in front of him. He closed his eyes, and took a long breath in through his nose, and blew it out - albeit quietly - from his mouth.

It did nothing to calm him.

With a sigh that he felt had now become his trademark, Gordon clambered up. He only allowed the few top of his head to peek over the edge of the tunnel. A closed garage door stubbornly stood in front of him. Off to his left and quite a few feet away, two open body shops lay stripped bare, lockers ripped to pieces and toolboxes tossed to the floor. The soldier sitting on a bench in the left-hand garage with his back to him worried Gordon… but he couldn't help noticing the loud hydraulic noises behind him. Slowly turning his head, Gordon came face-to-back with a tank. An honest to goodness tank.

Gordon had never seen one of those. He didn't particularly like it.

With a jerky speed, Gordon, heaved himself out of the hole in the ground and edge away from the tank, keeping a wary eye on both the vehicle and the unaware soldier in the corner. Slowly, he moved around the tank, and could see that just ahead of it on the wall on the left was a booth with a promising looking control panel inside. Beside it, Gordon could just make out some big road-blocking sized doors. He tucked himself back behind the tank, checked the soldier, and went for the door.

Four soldiers running around the tank skidded to halt on the other end of the tank. Gordon lifted the M4 and squeezed what he hoped was the secondary trigger. With a satisfying clunk, the grenade launched from the lower nozzle and collided with the soldier in the middle of the group. He exploded in a brilliant flash, the blast

knocking his comrades off in different directions, slamming one soldier face first into the tank and two on the other side into the wall.

With a little hop first, Gordon launched forward, sprinting for all he was worth through the cloud of smoke. As he went through, he made out the shadowy figure of someone approaching him from the left and lashed out with the butt of his rifle. It connected with the attacker's face with a crunch, forcing whoever it was back. Gordon reached the windowless, door-less booth and slammed his fist into the green button. The huge door beside him groaned open, and he darted through, wondering why the tank hadn't done anything to him yet.

Just as he slipped through the opening gap in the doors, one of them exploded, blowing Gordon up into the air. Gravity brought him back down with alarming speed, and he held onto his glasses with one hand while tucking his body into the closest approximation of a ball he could manage at such short notice. He hit the road less than gracefully, skidding along until he reached the sand on roadside.

He took a breath, blew it out, and straightened his glasses before standing up again. The doors were still opening, which meant the tank would most likely be following him through any minute. The road went off to his left, crates randomly piled on either side doing nothing to block his view of what waited for him at the far end of the road.

Because sat there, sandwiched between two mountains of sandbags, was a smaller white tank. There was a flash, and a rocket raced towards him from the tank's nozzle. He dove to the ground, and he felt the heat from the rocket as it shot over him and exploded against the wall. Gordon pointlessly glanced back at where the rocket had hit the wall before scrambling to his feet and going forward. He dodged from one side of the road to the other, taking cover behind the crates on either side. It reminded him of the bunker in the rail system.

Except this time it wasn't just bullets he was facing. And he didn't have Bennett for backup.

The tank either didn't want to waste its' rockets or was a stickler for a sure shot, because it didn't fire once as Gordon dodged around the road, managing to edge closer and closer to the tank until he was a good few feet away. He sprinted for the sandbags on the left of the tank. The tank's cannon followed him all the way. Gordon leapt for the sandbags, barrelling over them just as the tank fired and left a hole in the road behind him. The explosion actually gave him a much needed boost.

Landing on the other side in something between a skid and a roll, Gordon was back up on his feet in a few seconds and running for the large door to whatever lay beyond. The cannon behind him began to turn as he reached the huge metal door. It was the only way forward, the walls on either side of him closing in until they met on either side of the door. With a groan, the door opened for him automatically. Gordon sped dashed inside, finding just another large metal door. He continued forward towards it, and the door behind him clanged shut, plunging him into darkness.

After a pause, the door in front of him opened, bathing him once again in hot New Mexico sunlight. The road he stood on led into a large building, a sign next to the large metal door reading 'ORDINANCE STORAGE FACILITY'. Which could only mean more explosions. Which made Gordon oh so happy.

Gordon stepped towards and was halfway there when he heard a noise not unlike a plane going overhead, and he looked up to see what he could only describe as a giant stingray flash flying through the sky. One of those large armoured creatures like the one at the lab dropped out as it flew over Gordon, landing with an intimidating thud in front of him. With a slow growl, it straightened up from its' doubled over position. A noise from behind him made Gordon turn, and he saw one of the electricity aliens charging up a blast.

As the creature thrust its' spindly arms forward, Gordon leapt to the side, the electricity charging past him and colliding with the bigger alien's chest. The blast knocked it howling back across the gravel and into the wall. It fell to the ground, lifeless. Gordon whirled around with his M4 and fired, tearing several holes in the electricity creature before it fell with a gargle.

After taking a few seconds to check for further threats, Gordon checked the metal door and then a smaller, human-sized door just beside it. Both were locked and made of rather heavy metal. He didn't fancy his chances shooting them or whacking them with the crowbar, and he didn't want to waste whatever grenades he might have left in the launcher. And a fairly insurmountable looking fence was on the left hand side of the building put him off that particular method of entry. But he could see a possible way into the building from there. A collapsed air vent created a diagonal metal bridge from the ground up. Some power transformers stood nearby alongside a few explosive barrels.

Honestly, what was with this facility and explosive barrels? Gordon hadn't worked at the facility long, but still… he had never noticed so many explosives being thrown around the place. He put it down to military influence, or at least he hoped it was.

So, he started walking around the broken and charred ruins of the building. He took one step around the corner on the right before he froze, a familiar luminescent blue light making him freeze on the spot. He looked down and saw a laser mine planted below him. By some fluke, he had managed to step over it with his first footfall. His breathing light and his movements slow, Gordon lifted his other leg over and continued on down the alleyway. He came across two more lasers, one directly in front of him and another around a right corner leading up some stairs. Both were pretty easy to circumnavigate, but Gordon felt ill at ease from their very presence. It meant that either soldiers had already been here, or some crazy security guard had set them up.

At this point, it could be either.

Gordon found himself around the back of the storage facility, which mirrored the front. A sandy gravel on either side of the road leading out of the middle of the facility. Gordon hoped that the doors on this side were open. Maybe there would be an air vent. That would be handy. A sign on the other side of the road warned of more mines, the same skull and crossbones painted crudely on. He frowned when he saw a body lying just in front of the road, clawing slowly on the gravel. It was a security guard.

"Help me… somebody, please help me, I… I'm dying out here… please… help me…"

Without thinking, Gordon sprinted over to him.

"Hang on. I'm-"

Something incredibly painful slammed into his back, knocking him forward, across the road and onto the sandy gravel on the other side. He kicked up a cloud of dust as he scrambled to his feet like a wounded animal, quickly darting behind one of the thick pillars that framed the metal door opposite the storage facility. Gordon peeked around the corner. Another shot rang out, and he ducked back around. When he looked back, he saw the security guard's head spread out on the tarmac in front of him.

Taking in the scene as quickly as he could, Gordon spotted some vague movement near the stairs he had come up earlier. Just above them, two broken windows were suspiciously darkened, camo netting spread out over the one on the left hand side. He ducked back inside just in time to avoid another high powered bullet. It embedded itself in the sand beside him. Gordon didn't want to think about how far down it went. He looked up to the winding alleyway that would take him around the other side of the storage building.

The one that was apparently littered with mines, but it was either that or a sniper rifle, so…

Gordon leapt to his feet and ran for it, firing blindly at the ground in front of him as he went. He imagined that Barney would probably have screamed crazily as he went, but somehow that didn't feel like something *he* would do, so Gordon elected to remain silent. Two mines exploded in front of him; one just in front of the corner, and one in the very edge of the corner. Just as he whipped around to the left, another sniper bullet caught him in the shoulder, knocking him around back to front. He slammed back-first into the wall behind him and winced.

The HEV suit beeped incessantly, warning him of various impacts and fractures his body had sustained. The words 'morphine administered' echoed their way into his brain, and he relaxed. Although, it wasn't *technically* morphine; it was just called that for those who were less scientifically inclined. Stockholders and investors, mostly. Actual morphine would have been a bad idea. Having employees addicted to drugs wasn't exactly good for business.

Well, except maybe for Aperture Science. Only God knew what they were smoking. Some of the stuff they came up with made him-

Gordon shook his head to stop his mind from wandering off. A side effect of the artificial morphine was that it could cause the user to lose focus. It actually did more than morphine, though. It accelerated the human healing process somewhat. Not enough to stop him from being killed by lots of people shooting at him, but over a few hours it could knit together broken bones and torn ligaments. It was recommended that users take part in no movement whatsoever while this healing process was underway.

The thought of doing nothing for a few hours made Gordon smile deliriously.

He pushed himself off the wall and continued along the alleyway, coming to the collapsed air vent he had spotted earlier. With some difficulty (and some imitation circus-act balancing) Gordon managed to walk his way up to the roof of the building. Thick air vents created

a maze around the roof, reminding Gordon of a hedge maze. Just… shiny and metal.

There went the morphine again.

He continued through the 'maze' until he reached a hole in the roof below him. It looked rather haphazard and very burnt, smoke still burning from the edges. Gordon knelt down and looked inside. A dark room full of crates and… a bored looking scientist, sitting on one of them.

Gordon cleared his throat, and the scientist looked up at him in alarm. "Um… coming through."

The scientist blinked, and then shook his head, quickly moving out of Gordon's way. Gordon dropped inside, his landing quieter than he had expected. The scientist came towards him, the sunlight from the hole in the roof above lighting his face in a less than friendly manner.

"You're heading for the Lambda Complex, aren't you?"

Gordon opened his mouth to reply, but the scientist just kept going, slicked back hair shining in the sunlight from above. "I was heading there myself until I wound up here and…" he glanced back at the door behind him, "well, simply lost my nerve. Take one look out that door and you'll see what I mean!" he shouted defensively, as though Gordon had said something to insult his pride. But then he seemed to calm himself, and brushed his hands down the sides of his lab coat. "I'm just going to wait out the rest of the catastrophe in here. If you intend to go on, then I beg of you," he grasped Gordon by the arms, staring into his eyes, "proceed with extreme caution."

For a time, they just stood staring at each other, Gordon feeling more unnerved by the minute. His bespectacled gaze travelled up to the door leading out of the small room, and after one more glance at the scientist, he went through as slowly as he could manage, the rusty hinges of the door whining in protest. The corridor stretched off to his right, leading to some stairs that went up to another corridor that

turned left. Simple enough, except for the laser trip mines placed every few metres or so along the wall.

Gordon looked over at the scientist. "So?"

"So? So?! This is an Ordinance Storage Facility! That means explosives. *Lots* of explosives. Including nuclear missiles! You trip one of those explosive trip lasers and you could start a chain reaction that could destroy the entire complex!"

"… why do we have nuclear missiles?"

"I-" the scientist looked down at his striped tie and started fidgeting with it. "I have no idea."

He cocked an eyebrow at the scientist, but left it at that. He returned his attention to the corridor and started making his way over, under and otherwise around the blue lasers. Eventually, he managed to get up the stairs, coming face to face with a sign reading 'SECURITY IS EVERYONE'S RESPONSIBILITY'.

Gordon just glared at it and moved on to his left. The corridor went down like a ramp, leading into the main storage room. It was like a huge basement, crates of all sizes piled up randomly around the room, tucked into indentations in the walls and cargo elevators. Two intimidating missiles were stacked up in thick metal frames at the far end of the room. Above him, Gordon could see observation rooms, presumably with controls inside to operate the cargo cranes dangling over his head. In the very middle of the room, Gordon could see a cargo elevator with a control box erected in front of it, red and green buttons flashing enticingly.

Lasers were attached to almost every item in the room. After a deep breath, Gordon started making his way forward, negotiating his gangly frame through the maze of blue lasers. A quiet scuffling sound from behind a crate made him freeze between lasers, and Gordon watched as a headcrab wandered out. It was on the other side of a laser, although it didn't seem to notice the danger as it

turned towards him and lifted up its' fangs threateningly. It looked ready to leap straight at him. Gordon dropped his rifle and whipped out his crowbar, quickly kneeling. He swept the crowbar out beneath the laser, catching the headcrab in the side and impaling it to the crate from which it had crawled.

His head dropped as he waited for his pulse to slow down. He slipped the crowbar away, picked up his rifle, and squeezed his way onto the elevator. The buttons on the control panel were flashing, and Gordon suddenly got the horrible feeling that it wouldn't work. At all. His face scrunched in a half-wince, Gordon reached out a cautious finger and pressed the green button. Nothing happened.

Then, with a positive sounding 'bing', the elevator started descending, and Gordon smiled. Something went right. His smile vanished, replaced with a weary frown. Now only a few thousand things had to go wrong to balance it all out.

The lowering platform brought him down into a smaller area full of crates. A corridor behind him went onward for a few feet before arching off to the right. Gas pipes ran along the corner of the wall, bending along with it before disappearing around the corner. The platform touched down, and Gordon stepped off, his booted foot squelching against something. He froze, and clenched his eyes shut. Gordon didn't want to look. He really didn't. Slowly opening his eyes, he edged his gaze downwards.

He had stepped on a claw. A dismembered claw at that. It looked like it belonged to one of those big aliens, like the one he had let out of containment in the lab. Where the rest of the body was, Gordon didn't know, but the claw seemed alive enough. It squirmed beneath his foot uncomfortably, as though only slightly inconvenienced by him. Gordon just wanted to shoot it and go on his way. He turned his rifle on the creature/claw/weapon thing.

"Heeeey! Aaaaaaagh!"

Gordon's head whipped up to the corridor. Machinegun fire rattled from around the corner, and before long a security guard sprinted around, head leaning forward as though to give him more speed. Gordon started making his way towards him, the creature beneath his foot forgotten. Flashes of light from around the corner accompanied the thundering weapons fire, and a spurt of red burst from the guard's neck. He collapsed to the ground in mid-run, his momentum turning his fall into a leap before he skid to a halt on the dusty ground.

His grip on the rifle tightened. Gordon couldn't keep his eyes of the dead body. He heard laughter echoing from the soldiers.

They were laughing.

He started walking down the corridor. Without a care for taking cover, Gordon walked around the corridor, where the two soldiers were walking away, congratulating each other on a 'nice hit'. Gordon lifted his weapon, aiming it at the gas pipes at a point just beside the soldiers.

"Hello."

They whipped around to face him, weapons at the ready. Gordon fired. The explosion almost instantly engulfed the soldiers, their screams quickly drowned out by the noise. A chain reaction spread down the pipes around Gordon, and he quickly crouched down, clutching his arms around his head for protection. The HEV suit took the brunt of the heat, although Gordon could still feel a heat behind his ears. Once the noise had died down, Gordon slowly peeked out from behind his arms. Two blackened lumps lay before him, their weapons melted beyond use. His own rifle lay on the ground in a similar state.

Instantly, Gordon's hand was on his crowbar, which had miraculously survived the heat, having been pressed against the wall opposite the pipes. The sheath had seen better days, but for the moment, it

seemed to be faring well. But that still left him relatively defenceless, which wasn't a good position in this place.

Unless…

A reluctant wrinkle at the top of his nose, Gordon walked back to the alien claw. It was still squirming on the floor, very much alive. Wincing, he reached down and picked it up, trying to get comfortable enough with it to carry it like a rifle. It was quite fatty on the underside, giving Gordon something to hold onto. There was something slightly more solid towards the back end of the creature, feeling like a stress ball beneath his fingers. Feeling he should be arrested for doing it, Gordon gave the lump a squeeze.

With a high pitched bang, three small darts shot out of the front of the claw in quick succession, buzzing away from him like insects before lodging in the wall of the corridor.

Well, it was *something,* at least.

The claw let out a noise somewhere between a squelch and a purr.

As soon as he found a human weapon, there was definitely going to be a trade-off.

As he walked back down the corridor, he passed by the body of the security guard, which, having fallen out of range of the gas pipes, had been spared the searing demise of his enemies. Gordon looked down at the inert guard below him.

"I'm sorry."

He continued on around the bend. A military supply van was sat facing towards him at the mouth of the corridor, leading out into another warehouse sized room. Gordon cautiously went around it, pointing his squelchy weapon towards the back of the vehicle. He stopped at the corner of the van for a few moments before whirling around. The whine of the military turret almost made him take cover

again, but with a quick swing of the claw weapon he knocked the turret's legs out from under it, knocking it on its' front. The turret powered down as it landed on the floor of the van with a thunk.

An open crate behind the deactivated weapon drew Gordon in, and he ventured inside. A yellow sign on the front said 'DETONATOR PACKS'. Inside, Gordon found some handy-sized, military green bags, a small antennae sticking out of one side. Slotted into a side pocket on the bag was a remote control with a single red button on it. Surmising that having a remote controlled explosive might be useful at some point, Gordon picked one up and hopped back out of the van.

Gordon blew out a breath and turned back to his onward journey. An opening on the left hand side of the 'warehouse' led up a concrete ramp. The ramp led to a road that turned almost instantly to the right. Blue sky blared in from the exit, and it attracted Gordon up to it almost hypnotically. A wall on his right ran all the way up the ramp, conveniently disguising whatever could be hiding there. Once he reached the edge, he leaned around it and checked the road ahead. The road led in a straight line to a closed garage on the far side of the area, a sandy ridge on the right of the road slanting up to a two storey building.

Not much to fear there. Some metal green crates in front of the garage, but they didn't look *that* bad. Oh, they certainly looked *ominous*, but not ominous enough to make Gordon want to find another path. He took one step out into the open when the familiar noise of one of those alien planes echoed overhead, and he quickly ducked back down. The stingray-esque ship slowed for just a moment before continuing on its' way. Gordon peeked around the corner again. Now there were quite a few of those giant armoured aliens waiting for him.

It was like being invited to a party.

With a resigned sigh, Gordon took another step out when another noise assaulted his ears, this one far more abrasive; a military jet.

Once more, Gordon ducked back behind the wall. After a few seconds of waiting, Gordon silently turned and walked all the way back down the ramp and into the warehouse, taking shelter in the corridor just behind the military van. These were the soldiers he had been fighting for two days now. He knew that if these people liked anything, it was explosions.

As if answering his thoughts, explosions rocked the corridor, small clumps of cement and clouds of dust falling from the ceiling and, irritatingly, getting on his glasses. After a good few minutes of trying to get his glasses back to some approximation of transparency, Gordon ventured back up the ramp. Blackened scorch marks ran all the way down the wall, and Gordon felt the satisfaction of being right about something. That satisfaction quickly faded when he stepped back out into the open again, this time completely forgetting to peek first.

The garage door had been blown open, a white tank firmly sat halfway out of the entrance. Four soldiers flanked the behemoth, as though somehow they were needed to protect it. They all spotted him and opened fire.

For some reason, instead of retreating back into the warehouse area, Gordon ran forwards, only just realising his error when the tank fired on him. He felt the air whoosh by his face as the projectile went past, hitting the wall and exploding in a brilliant flash. Gordon scrambled up the sandy ridge, heading for a platform that overlooked the exit of the warehouse. He reached it as another explosion blasted chunks of brick and cement all over him, making him lose some balance and stumble awkwardly into the wall.

A tank. Gordon Freeman, ordinary scientist turned incredibly lucky idiot, was supposed to take out a tank. Maybe if he strafed towards the tank, going from right to left erratically, it wouldn't be able to get a bead on him, he could jump up on top, remove the driver, and take possession. And then, of course, he wouldn't be Gordon Freeman, ordinary scientist. He would be Gordon Freeman, tank driver. Mess with him at your own peril.

He sighed and shook his head before looking around the area. There was a door that led into the building, but it looked pretty blocked up. He looked down at the explosive in his hand.

Oh, *if only* he had something to dislodge the door.

With a smile, he removed the remote control from the pack, and wedged the green bag between the doorway and the warped door. He backed up as much as he dared before crouching in a ball and pushing the button. The door exploded off its' hinges, and Gordon had to quickly step out of the way to avoid being crushed into the wall. He sprinted in through the smoking doorway, all too aware that the four soldiers that accompanied the tank were on their way.

The two soldiers inside the building seemed rather alarmed by the whole thing. Gordon squeezed the appropriate - well, he supposed 'muscle' was the term - and watched as the darts flew out, impaling the soldiers in the neck, face and arms. They seemed to seek out unprotected flesh, which brought out the scientist in Gordon. That would seem to imply that darts themselves were alive, and that-

The claw purred/moaned again, and Gordon tossed it to the ground. After a quick shudder, he picked up the rifle a fallen soldier and looked for an exit. An open doorway on the right looked like it led out into an alleyway, which seemed like a good bet. Machine gun fire rattled away in the distance, and Gordon recognised the noise of the buzzing darts being fired back in return. A fire escape ladder led up the building opposite, and Gordon started climbing. When he reached the first metal platform, a mighty explosion rocked both buildings, and Gordon gripped the guardrail tightly.

Were they bombing the place? Why? Weren't their own people down here?

He shook the thoughts from his head and climbed up to the roof. What was left of the roof, anyway. It was mostly present on his side, but the rest of it looked like it had been ripped out from underneath, only twisting and dented metal framework still present. There was

the occasional platform of roof, but for the most part, it was just gone. Gordon could see the guard tower he had spied from the minefield, and surmised that that was where the helipad was, also.

Out of the frying pan…

Diagonally down on the opposite side of the building, Gordon could see an open doorway (with no floor in front of it save a *very* small ledge) that seemed to turn off the right. Since that was the direction the helipad lay, Gordon started planning some dangerous jumps. He would have to use the chunks of roof like stepping stones, slowly edging his way from onto the other until he could…

With a shrug, he took a few steps back and sprinted full on towards the ledge before leaping into the air. As he flew through the air, the strangest thing happened.

Gordon smiled. A crazy jump that had all likelihood of killing him, and he was smiling.

He hit the floor of the open doorway at such speed he had to turn the landing into a forward roll or land flat on his face. And at those speeds, Gordon got the feeling his glasses would definitely break. Right now, those things were the most valuable commodity he had. He rolled along and hit the wall quite violently. His suit beeped indignantly.

" *Warning. Minor fracture detected. Morphine administered."*

But somehow, still, the smile remained. He straightened his glasses and heaved himself to his feet.

Through the doorway at the end of the corridor, Gordon could see the open expanse of the helipad. Feeling somewhat more serious now, he removed the smile from his face and cautiously crept up to the entrance. He was in the very left hand corner of the helipad, and from where he was he could see pretty much everything. A soldier transport helicopter- Gordon didn't really know it's name, he just

knew it had wings and propellers, which always seemed a bit redundant to him, but then again, he wasn't really qualified to comment on military-

And there went the morphine again.

Anyway, the soldier transport helicopter was hovering just above the helipad, ropes dangling from either side of the open interior. Six or soldiers stood beneath the helicopter, surveying the area around them. Two large metal doors in the upper right hand corners of the helipad area led to places that Gordon was probably destined to go. In which case, he was going to need some snappy plan in order to get out of this. Just as Gordon processed this thought, one of them spotted him. For a brief moment, all they did was stare at each other. Then the soldier took a breath, and Gordon prepared himself for the carnage that was about to ensue.

Had he even taken on six soldiers at once? This would be a first. But then again, this had been two days solid of nothing *but* firsts, so why would the Black Mesa Facility stop throwing these things at him now?

The door behind the soldiers exploded open just as the soldier shouted to his fellows about Gordon, and three of the armoured aliens thundered through, instantly opening fire on the soldiers. In return, the soldiers quickly fired back, barking orders to each other and darting every way they could to avoid the buzzing darts.

Gordon knew a cue when he saw one. After hopping up and down on the spot like an athlete warming up, Gordon launched himself out into the battlefield. All of the human soldiers were too busy trying to survive to pay him much heed outside of an outraged glare, the but the aliens were nowhere near as forgiving. They seemed to take every opportunity they could swing their burly arms at his head and fire off as many darts as they could before he got out of their range.

But he managed to duck and weave his way around most of them, until coming to the entrance to the tunnel that would take him to

freedom. One of the creatures stood firmly in place in the centre of the entrance, its' claw aimed right for him. Gordon lifted the M4 rifle and fired madly ahead of him, aiming for the creature's belly. Yellow blood spurted out onto the concrete behind the creature, but to its' credit, it kept on firing at him, too. For some reason, the darts seemed content to try and lodge themselves in his HEV suit instead of his flesh as they had done with the soldiers earlier.

Maybe it had something to do with the amount heat from any given object, and that would relate to-

Gordon shook his head as he reached the creature.

Science later, Freeman.

He leapt to the ground between the creatures legs, sliding through and successfully coming out the other end before scrambling to his feet and blasting off down the tunnel. The creature obviously found better things to occupy it, since it didn't follow and didn't fire on him as he left.

That didn't stop Gordon from running like a headless chicken, however. The tall, wide tunnel arched off to the right, and then to the left shortly afterwards, the road beneath him arching up. It led up into the ruins of another building, metal framework poking out of powdery layers of cement. A mounted machinegun was sat in the middle of the road, pointing up at the ruins. Gordon kept on running, trying to ignore the way the back of his neck tingled after seeing the weapon.

As he reached the skeleton of the building, three green flashes of light exploded into existence around him. Electricity aliens were suddenly all around him. Never once faltering, Gordon continued running, although he had no idea where to. He frowned as he noticed something pink and fleshy growing out of the concrete floor below him. It looked like a speaker on a stereo system.

"Freeman."

Gordon whirled around the low guttural noise behind him. The three creatures simply stood in their hunched over positions, staring at him as he stumbled back onto the pink growth in the floor. As his feet touched it, it made a noise like a balloon deflating and sent him hurtling up into the air. Hit by two surprises in a row, Gordon didn't really have much of a chance to prepare himself for the impact. Amazingly, it wasn't that bad. The angle at which he had hit the pink thing sent him up onto the second floor of the broken building. So that only left about a foot for him to fall, which, after diving down chasms was like a baby step.

But that wasn't what was unnerving Gordon. Did those things actually say his name? And *not* try to kill him? True, there had been that creature back in the office complex who had seemed docile before something happened to the green bonds on its' wrists, ankles and neck. Gordon had thought of the possibility that they were slaves to some higher power, but other things had gotten in the way of such existential musings.

Still lying on his back, Gordon slowly rotated over to so he could see over the edge of the floor and down below. The creatures hissed and snarled viciously before charging up their electricity attack and letting loose on him. Gordon quickly rolled back to safety, and decided to forget about the whole incident. He *had* been awake for two days straight. *And* he was hopped up on morphine. It was entirely possible he was hallucinating by this point.

Machinegun fire got him to his feet, and Gordon moved towards the noise. The wall was broken down in front of him, and he walked over to see a small alleyway below where some solders and aliens had decided to meet and… exchange opinions. Gordon sat down, safely tucked away from both as he waited for the fighting to end. Wasn't exactly honourable, but it worked.

A surprisingly short amount of time later, the battle stopped, and Gordon managed a cautious peek over the edge. Well, the soldiers were dead, and there quite a few of those armoured aliens lying

dead on the ground as well. One sat up against the wall on the far end, its' breathing clearly laboured.

Gordon dropped down to the alleyway with surprising silence and grace, although it was enough for the creature to hear. It whipped its' head up, and wearily tried to raise its' claw.

One bullet was enough.

He tried to ignore the guilt as he looked around for some way to further his advance through the hellhole he had wandered into. Beside the dead creature, a dented air vent cover practically invited him over. With relish, Gordon pulled out the crowbar and smashed the rusting cover to bits. He returned the weapon to its' rightful place and crawled inside the vent.

It slanted upwards, and Gordon could see a pinkish-red light radiating from something at the very top. As he crawled, Gordon could see that it was coming from *behind* the metal wall of the vent at the top. And he was certain he could hear something coming from behind it. Once more, fate was kind to him. The metal crashed open, small red creatures leaping out and scuttling towards him at such a speed that Gordon barely had time to cover his head with his arms before they reached him.

They squeaked and whined as their beaks pecked and bit into his HEV suit, trying to find a way in. Occasionally they would catch his ear of the back of his neck, making him hiss in pain. He dared not wave his arms around to get rid of them lest they make a break for his face. All he could so was sit there. The suit beeped as another creature bit his ear.

" *Warning. Minor lacerations detected."*

"Really?!" he yelled.

The squeaking was getting higher in pitch, and their attacks became more frenzied. Then, just as Gordon was about to despair, they

stopped. After just a brief puzzled noise, they all exploded, yellow blood spattering the vents walls and Gordon's suit. Slowly, he brought his head up. He smiled, but it was a worried smile all the same. The randomness of these creatures was not making him feel good.

He grabbed his rifle and continued crawling. A small room had been made behind the metal wall of the vent, where some creature had obviously decided to lay its' eggs. At least, Gordon assumed they were eggs. A purplish-blue dome of some kind of membrane, surrounded by a material that Gordon could only describe as egg white. That seemed like a pretty good excuse for an alien egg.

Although he wasn't going to be touching them, thank you very much. He already felt like he had violated one alien creature today, he wasn't about to do the same to another. Gordon crawled on around the corner to the left, and then followed it again to the right. Another vent cover stood in his way, and with a grumble, Gordon pulled out his crowbar and reduced it to scrap. He could see daylight in the far distance, filtering through another vent cover on the other side of the vent.

A radio hissed somewhere beneath him.

" *Sir, I hear somethin'."*

" *Move it!"*

Machinegun fire made him freeze with fear instantly. Suddenly, shafts of light began appearing just in front of his goal. More started to appear and move their way towards him until eventually the entire bottom of the vent had collapsed to nothing. Gordon backed up around the corner as fast as he could. What the hell could he do now? He had no idea how many soldiers were down there, and he didn't like his chances of just dropping down and seeing how it went. What he needed was something to distract them, something that would…

He looked over at the eggs of the creatures and smiled. The blue eggs themselves were fairly light, but Gordon was sure he could make out about five of the creatures inside, their single green eyes gazing out at the world curiously. Gordon crawled to the very edge of the destroyed vent and tossed the eggs in. They landed with a fairly nauseating splat, and Gordon heard the familiar chirps and squeaks as the creatures sought out prey.

"What the fuck?" one soldier laughed, oblivious to the danger of the mouse-sized creatures.

The machinegun fire started up pretty quickly after that as the creatures attacked in earnest. Once again, Gordon sat around waiting while the noise slowly died down. And even then, he had to wait for the alien things to explode in case he became a target himself.

After he was fairly sure he had heard enough explosions, Gordon dropped down into what he found was a car body repair shop. A Black Mesa people carrier was held up high on one of the repair platforms. But, while he truly did find this fascinating, Gordon had a job to do. To that end, he headed for the metal door that seemed reminiscent of one in a prison. He found himself outside again in a small courtyard, an open garage door in the far left corner leading into another large tunnel that went off to the right.

As Gordon walked down the tunnel and towards another corner cutting left, the now familiar sounds of battle assaulted his ears, making his pace slow considerably. He pressed his back to the wall and took a quick scan around the corner. A rather large warehouse area lay down below him. A now fairly useless looking tank had ploughed through the wall, with soldiers and alien creatures alike littered around the entire area. In front of him stood a metal walkway that ran along to the left and all across the wall until it reached another doorway on the far side of the room.

Without much prompting, Gordon started running, glad for a straight path for once. The soldiers and aliens barely noticed him as he

skirted around their battle.

Gordon smiled. He could get used to this.

One of the electricity aliens appeared in the doorway just as he reached it, but a swift blow from the butt of his rifle knocked it aside, allowing Gordon to fire off a few shots into its' head and drop it to the floor. Slowing his run to a quick walk, Gordon continued on down the corridor when the wall on his left exploded out at him, one of the armoured aliens reaching for him through the dust and debris.

He brought up his rifle and fired it point blank into the creature's snarling, three cheeked maw, the bullets blasting straight through the head. With a great lumbering motion, the creature fell backwards to the ground, kicking up a slight cloud of dust as he went. Keeping an eye on the body, Gordon stepped through the hole and into the room beyond. It was another bare skeleton of a room, the wall in front of him entirely missing and leading him to his next stop.

A building opposite seemed to hold some promise until Gordon saw a security booth at the far end of the alleyway beneath him, and what looked like a door inside. From the looks of affairs, the aliens and the military had managed to wipe each other out in this area, with the obvious exception of the happy fellow who had burst through the wall. Ground level wasn't too far down, so Gordon hopped off and landed only a little discomfort. The suit said nothing in protest, which was a pleasant change.

On the other hand, Gordon was trying not to look at how low his stats were, so the suit was probably saving the objections for some of the bigger stunts he would pull before he reached the Lambda Complex and his role in all of this would be over and done with. Naturally, the door inside the booth had a 12 digit keypad beside it, locking it tight. Gordon looked to the building opposite the one he had entered from for salvation. Maybe there would be a way forward through there.

A relatively quick jaunt around the building proved worthless, since the only door on the other side of the building was also locked via keypad. Hopefully that meant the military weren't inside either. On his way back to the booth, Gordon noticed another of the fleshy trampoline platforms growing through the cracked tarmac of the road beneath him. He looked up to the roof of the building, and then back down to the trampoline.

With a shrug, he put the trampoline between the building and himself and ran straight for it. It launched him effortlessly into the air with a loud wheeze, bringing the bottom of his boots almost level with the gravel surface of the roof. He landed so gently Gordon almost expected the floor to give way beneath him or something equally unlikely and annoying.

But nothing. It was rather a nice feeling. Gordon got to looking around for some entrance into the building. It just then occurred to Gordon that he probably wouldn't be able to get back down again if he didn't, which hastened the search somewhat. And then he came across one of his oldest and dearest friends; an air vent cover, built into the floor beneath him.

In a stylish manner which indicated far too much usage, Gordon flipped out his crowbar, destroyed the grate, and slipped the crowbar away again. The shaft was pretty much a square, but Gordon could see a pool of water at the bottom. Whether it was deep enough to accommodate him, he didn't know but… he jumped anyway. Thankfully, it was deep enough, but just barely.

Gordon quickly came up for air and to straighten his glasses, looking around for anyway out of the tiny cubicle he had found himself in. A small circular tunnel in front of him seemed to point the way to freedom, and Gordon clambered inside. Much to his pleasure, it was above water level, so he didn't have to constantly deal with his chin dipping in and out of a thin layer of water as he crawled.

As he crawled his way through the tunnel, Gordon saw light just barely seeping through a hatch at the far end. With a creak, the

hatch suddenly opened, and Gordon was treated to the sight of a security guard stood waiting for him. He put up his hand to wave to the guard when he noticed him putting something quite familiar into the tunnel and then promptly closing the hatch;

A detonator pack.

Gordon started scrambling backwards as fast as he could crawl. His feet were just edging back into the water when the pack exploded, funnelling the explosion right towards him. He submerged himself completely, which was no mean feat considering he had to go completely foetal with a M4 rifle tucked around his body. He watched through the misty water as the explosion shot out into the air above him and finally dissipated.

Gordon climbed up and started crawling once again, this time moving with a very annoyed speed towards the hatch. He shoved the hatch open far too violently, sending it slamming against the wall beside it. It brought him out on some stairs, and Gordon crawled out hands first before awkwardly managing to lever himself back upright again.

"Stand back!"

The security guard was stood at the bottom of the stairs, handgun aimed straight at him. As soon as he noticed that Gordon was not in fact a soldier, he relaxed his hand completely and let the weapon drop to his side.

"Oh shit, I'm sorry. I thought you were one of them. Well, either one of them."

A cocked eyebrow was Gordon's only response.

"I mean, y'know… an alien or a soldier. Because… y'know, they're… everywhere. Yeah."

"Do you know the security code for doors around here?"

"Uh, yeah. You sure you want to go further, though? I mean… it's not great out there, you know."

"I'm sure."

The security guard didn't seem convinced, but decided not to pursue it any further.

"Okay," he said, holstering his weapon very deliberately, as though afraid it might go off. "Follow me."

Gordon did as he was told, and the security guard took him to the door on the far side of the building. With a flurry of fingers, he had the door open and was leading him around the building and into the booth. After the same quick motion of his hand, the security guard had opened the door, leading into a dimly lit corridor. Gordon stepped into it, but paused when he saw that the security guard wasn't following.

"Hey, I'm not crazy." With that, the security guard gave him a salute like he was saying goodbye to a madman, then turned and walked back to the building, presumably to lock himself inside again.

After watching the guard walk away for the longest time, Gordon just sighed, shrugged and continued on through the twisting corridor. It eventually brought him out in a large underground parking area, Black Mesa SUVs parked neatly in place all around him. On his left, two soldiers knelt at the ground, investigating something interesting there. He realised that it was another dead soldier. Something had obviously killed their comrade, and their had come down to investigate.

Three guesses who would get the blame. Public enemy number one, Dr Freeman.

The sound of thunderous footsteps quickly dissuaded that notion from Gordon, and he could only watch as a giant blue creature thundered towards the soldiers. It was just like the one he had faced

at the train system the day before, except this time it had things it could throw. For instance, the SUV it flipped like a card at the hapless soldiers.

Gordon quickly turned and ran before he saw the outcome, not in any particular mood to waste time. Luckily, he was heading in the right direction to get out of the car park, because he could see sunlight reflecting around the corners as he ran around the steadily upward slanting road. The footsteps of the creature followed quickly behind him.

He finally ended up outside, a huge imposing wall stopping any further progress. That is, if it wasn't for the alien trampoline thing conveniently placed in front of it. Gordon leapt at it resisted the temptation to close his eyes as he was launched higher into the air than he had ever been in his life. On the plus side, he could see over the wall. A huge, open tank of water stood just on the other side of the wall, and Gordon decided to aim his landing for that. As his ascent faltered and he started to plummet, he took a quick inventory of what else there was.

A tightrope of a pipe led from the tank he was going to land in to a huge tower with some complex control panel rigged on top. From the dead soldier lying beside it, Gordon took it to be a military addition to the facility. In the top left of the area was a huge, slanted, very secure looking door, which Gordon didn't once doubt was where he needed to go. Between the tower with the control panel and the platform with the door was a rather deep trench, which confused Gordon a little. What the hell was this place for, anyway?

The ice cold shock of the water stopped any further thoughts, and he didn't start thinking again until he had emerged from the water and clambered out of the tank and was on his very precarious way over the thin pipe to the military control panel. Almost as though detecting his presence, the radio beside the control panel crackled to life as he reached it. A rough snarl of a voice emerged.

" *Come in. Cooper, do you copy? Forget about Freeman; we're abandoning the base."*

Gordon had to stop himself from falling over. They were what? Abandoning? Forgetting about him? He grinned inanely and stuck his arms out to the sides.

"Hallelujah," he said quietly.

" *If you have any last bomb targets mark them on the technical map. Otherwise, get the hell out of there."* There was a pause on the other end, and for a moment, Gordon thought the radio had broken. *"Repeat, we are pulling out and commencing air strikes. Give us targets or get below."*

Gordon looked down at the control panel. It was basically a table with an LCD monitor covering it. On it was a rough layout of Gordon's basic area, from the wall he had just leapt over to the secure door at the top left. There were two levers on either side of the panel; one that moved from left to right, and another that went up and down. On the screen, four lines in pairs crisscrossed the map. A red button between the two control levers completed the simple design wonderfully. So whatever was caught in the crosshairs would be blown to bits. Gordon looked up upon seeing something on the map he hadn't noticed during his freefall. There was supposed to be two electrical towers just in front of him, but they seemed to be…

Ah. Standing on tiptoes seemed to be the answer. Somewhere along the way, the electrical tower had met with some unfortunate explosion, and now created a rather convenient bridge across the deep trench to the platform with the secure door. And he had a bombing system at his disposal…

Gordon smiled. A new toy.

Even the thundering footsteps of the huge blue creature behind him didn't dissuade his confidence. He turned and watched as he saw the creature emerge from the large tunnel and walk to the wall. It

seemed to study it for a few moments, and Gordon took that time to aim. He put the crosshairs just in front of the wall, since he doubted the creature would allow it to stand in the way for long.

True to form, it destroyed the wall in front of it like cardboard. Gordon pushed the red button, and heard the overhead whine of bombs being dropped.

The explosion was so bright, Gordon had to cover his eyes. When they were open again, there was little left of the creature except for a few flaming chunks spread here and there about the walls. Gordon's smile grew, and he returned to the control panel, aligning the crosshairs over the door. Within a few seconds, it was reduced to rubble, and Gordon was on his way down the ramp that encircled the tower he stood on.

He clambered up onto the collapsed electrical tower and walked across to the platform with remarkable assurance for someone who knew he was going to be subjected to air strikes. The high pitched whine of incoming bombs increased his pace somewhat, and before he knew it he was inside and heading back into the bowels of the Black Mesa Facility.

Gordon could only afford one last longing glimpse at the sun before turning to the tunnel and going in. An explosion rocked the tunnel around him, and bits and pieces of the ceiling rained down on him. His pace quickened even more. Hopefully he would be seeing the sun again sometime soon.

Another explosion made him stumble.

This is why the tank would have been a good idea.

(A/N: What a whopper this one was. I found it pretty difficult to edit this chapter, since so many of the action set-pieces from the game are so memorable. The cliff-side, the tank down the alleyway, the building full of trip mines…

But, that was the last *truly* epic sized chapter. With perhaps the exception of 'Lambda Core', most of the chapters to come are low on actual distance traversed, and more about character and action. Although I hope my stories are about character and action anyway, so that works out quite neatly, I think.

So, then… reviews, if you please!)

Missing in Action

-1Disclaimer: I don't own *Half-Life.*

(A/N: Seriously, many thanks and a very Merry Christmas to hhgbh. I even wrote 'crowbar' instead of 'wrench'. Shephard would be ashamed of me. If he was real. And read fan-fiction about himself. Anyway, thank you hhgbh.)

The Black Mesa Incident

Chapter Twenty Three: Missing in Action

The heat coming from the steam pipes was making Shephard sweat in the confined space of the corridor. He longed to remove his gas mask and wipe the layer of sweat that had congealed on his face, but for all he knew, a blast of steam could break out of these pipes at any moment. If seeing the Black Mesa Facility up close had taught him anything, it was that *everything* was broken and ready to explode.

Eventually, he managed to squeeze his way underneath a pipe that took up the entirety of the thinning alleyway ahead, and crawled in a manner that took him back to his boot camp.

" *We'll have you eating danger, and CRAPPING VICTORY!"*

What an asshole.

The miniature corridor opened up into a bigger room up ahead. Pipes ran along the wall in front of him, placed in such a manner that they provided a stairway upwards. In the right hand corner of the room where the pipes ended, an air vent cover allowed Shephard some brief hope of moving forward. A door on the right hand wall, only increased the feeling, but moved towards it with great caution anyway.

Desert Eagle at the ready, he edged his way towards the door and wrapped his hand around the door handle. Locked, and from the feel of it, made of a very heavy metal. Shephard had no desire to try and knock it down, and he didn't have an engineer to make the job easier. Hell, he didn't even have any grenades.

A flash of green light bathed him from behind, casting his shadow on the wall. Shephard whirled around and came face to face with another electricity throwing alien. Its' low gurgles became more vicious as it took in the gravity of Shephard pointing a gun into its' eye. Clutching its' claws together, it started charging an attack. Shephard pulled the trigger and blew the creature clear across the room and onto its' back. The cocking mechanism of the pistol locked back, indicating that it was out of ammunition.

With a flick of his thumb, Shephard slid the mechanism back into place and replaced the Desert Eagle with his Glock pistol. After getting a steady foothold on the bottom 'rung' of the pipes, Shephard climbed up to the vent cover and smashed it to bits with the wrench. Feeling conscious of the backpack he no longer had, Shephard crawled into the claustrophobic little hole and started shimmying.

After crawling through a few twists and turns, Shephard found himself at another vent cover, which was similarly dealt with. He climbed out onto a walkway overlooking two giant fans laid on their backs. They were side by side, only the thinnest of metal bars between them going untouched by the spinning blades. There doors at either end of the walkway, and Shephard tried them both before looking to the blades for an exit. He could see past the fans that there was another room below, although would have to walk between the fans and down (hopefully) a ladder to get there.

He cricked his neck and put away both the Glock and wrench, finding different parts of his uniform to tuck them into. Slowly, he slid himself beneath the guardrail and down onto the metal bar. Boot Camp was sure as hell going to pay off today. Although Shephard had to admit, there was a certain difference between balancing on a

wooden plank overlooking a pool of muddy water and a metal bar between two giant fans.

Shephard started on his way, arms outstretched to the side like a tightrope walker. The boots sure as hell weren't helping, and he considered going back and trying them on. One of the blades sliced the plastic tip of one of his bootlaces off.

Maybe getting this over with was the way to go.

After nine or ten stops and starts, Shephard reached the far end, and found himself on the smallest of platforms overlooking a ladder that went down to a walkway almost exactly the same as the one he had just come from. The fan on the right, however, only had one blade still intact, the rest lying shattered around it. It didn't seem to be running at full capacity, either. Just below the central structure of the fan, Shephard could see an open vent beneath.

He climbed down the ladder and stood just beside the broken fan, staying just out of reach of the slow but deadly blade. After watching it go around for the sixth time, Shephard dove down on his belly, sliding below the blade and into the duct below. He didn't know how far he fell, since the interior was pretty much pitch black. But once he *did* land, he knew that it was pretty far.

Thank God he didn't have one of those HEV suits. Those things informed you audibly every time you sustained an injury. Shephard thought he would probably be insane by now if he had to use on of those.

Waiting for the PCV to do its thing, Shephard flicked on his IR goggles and scanned the vent. He could see a light source coming from his left, behind another grate there. Once he felt the cool morphine soothing the pain in his shoulder from the rough landing, he started crawling again. He managed to kick the vent cover out of its' placement, and it landed with an echoing crash.

Not exactly subtle, but stealth was always something Shephard had had trouble with. The room was sparsely lit, the grey floors and dull brown metal of the walls not helping the situation. Even the IR goggles were struggling. In front of him, Shephard could see metal trench built into the ground leading out of a hole in the wall. A semi-circular shield stopped the trench about halfway before the wall. A sign above the hole in the wall read 'DO NOT OBSTRUCT TEST FLAME'.

Shephard took in the rest of the room. It was definitely an 'L' shape, going forward first, and then off to the left. There were some flat metal crates with the words 'DANGER: EXPLOSIVES' written on the side. Shephard made a note not to go near them. He started walking to the corner of the room when he noticed something odd about it, and the light that was being produced from it.

It was organic. But it was unlike anything Shephard had ever seen in any nature documentary. The light was coming from a thin brown stem, the very tip of the plant acting like a light bulb. It didn't radiate any heat, an when Shephard touched it, the light went out and the plant recoiled back down into the ground.

The entire corner of the room had all kinds of fauna and plants around it. Moss, mostly, but pale yellows and whites. He looked to the other corner of the room. It went up in a ramp to another of the trench devices, the same warning of non-obstruction there as well.

A pained, drawn out moan drew his attention to a figure just behind shield of the trench.

Shephard's Glock was out immediately. "Step into the light."

The figure swayed a little. Whoever or whatever it was, it was big.

"Now!"

A hulking zombie unlike any Shephard had seen back at the lab hurled itself out of the shadows, rippling arms outstretched before it.

Behind it, several normal (as normal as zombies could be) followed, two wearing scientist uniforms, and the other a soldier's. Whoever this was before, he bore little resemblance to the original. Even the clothing was missing. It was just a big, fleshy mass now, ready to kill anything that came its' way. He could make out a glowing green sack on the back of the body as well, but Shephard didn't even want to think about what the hell that was for. Long, spindly fingers ached to reach him, and Shephard, in no mood to become anybody's dinner, fired off a few shots at the head, remembering that it was a separate organism.

The zombie barely slowed it's approach. Its' wide hand closed around Shephard's gun, gripping his entire forearm tightly before tossing him clear across the room and into the wall at the far side of the 'L'. He just barely managed to keep a grip on the handgun. The other zombies had only just managed to stagger over to the creature's position when it threw Shephard in the other direction, so they seemed a little put out by having to turn around again. It started to come at him again, knocking aside a few explosive crates as it went. His eye instantly drawn to them, Shephard took aim and fired.

A chain reaction explosions started up almost instantly, and Shephard put up a hasty arm to shield his eyes from the blast. The sound of flames diligently flickering away gave him the all clear that he could lower his arm, and he slowly did so. Blood was pasted along the walls and ceiling, mixed with the scorch marks blasted across.

Shephard noticed a new source of light on the ceiling, and looked down the appropriate section of the floor. Some of the explosion had been strong enough to punch a fair sized hole there, and he managed to clear the rest with a few solid kicks from his boot. He lowered himself down, checking all around him for any more creatures that may be lurking in the darkness.

The underground passage was getting most of its' light through two large grates at the far end. Two metal pipes ran along the bottom of the rocky passage, and Shephard struggled to keep his boots on the

smooth surface. The sides of his feet constantly seemed to be dipping down the sides, and it got old pretty fast.

Three of the small alien crab creatures were waiting for him just before the grate. Shephard managed to kill two in mid-leap with the Glock, but the third managed to get at his face. The claws of the creature scratched against the lenses of his gasmask uselessly, and gave Shephard plenty of time to free his wrench and crush the crab into the wall.

Using the wrench, Shephard smashed the left-hand grate and dropped through. He landed on an underground road that slanted down and off to the left into some kind of complex built into the rock. The garage door leading into the complex had been forcibly kept open, a crushed military van smoking beneath it. Only a small gap beside the van allowed entrance. Frowning, Shephard looked around. Above him at the top of the hill was a closed emergency fire door, which Shephard knew he had no chance of opening. As he walked down the ramp to the half opened garage door leading into the complex, Shephard noticed something moving out from the gap.

His Glock and wrench both at the ready, he walked down towards the figure. He quickly put them both away when he noticed that it was a human. And not only that, it was a soldier. He ran to the black beret sporting soldier, instantly taking note of the thick trail of blood following him. Shephard knelt beside him, desperately trying to recall any of the basic medical training he was taught. The instant he saw the spike protruding from the soldier's bleeding belly, he knew there was little he could do.

The soldier grabbed him by the cuff of his PCV, pulling him down towards him. "You've… got to get out of here. Listen to me…" he glanced down at the nametag on the vest, "… Shephard…" he coughed. "Those… things… they'll kill all of us…"

His energy spent, the soldier's eyes rolled up into his head, and he fell to the ground. Shephard didn't know if he was dead or not, but he knew that there was little he could do either way. Glock held up at

the ready, Shephard squeezed his way underneath the warped door and into the parking garage.

Nothing seemed amiss so far, with the obvious exception of the trail of blood made by the soldier behind him. Since it was the only thing out of place, he followed it along the concrete until it turned to the left, eventually reaching a closed garage door. There were two of them, a thin section of wall separating them. The soldier had come from the one on the right, and, judging by the blood stains on the control panel, had managed to close it behind him.

He flexed his sweaty fingers around the grip of the pistol, listening to the creak of his fingerless gloves. A noise from above him drew his attention quickly upwards. Light footsteps pattered against the metal grates above him. The lighting from the upper section was so poor, Shephard couldn't see what was going on. All he knew was that something fast and light was moving up there.

His mouth was suddenly dry, so he swallowed, the noise far louder in his gasmask than he had thought it would be. He reached out and pressed the button.

The door opened with a compliant creak, slowly rising into the ceiling until only the very bottom of it was visible. All he could see was one of the metal frames cars were placed on to allow mechanics to see their undersides. Glock out in front of him, Shephard stepped inside. On the left, behind the closed garage door, a Black Mesa SUV was parked on another metal frame. Stairs behind it led up to a low platform that ran along the room to the right and down another corridor.

Keeping a wary eye out, Shephard started making his way towards the stairs. A yellow blur out of the corner of his eye made him freeze on the spot. Another on his left, then in front. He heard a noise behind him, and looked around to see another of the creatures there. They were similar in size to the whirring creatures, although these had two legs at the back to keep them upright. Spines ran along their

backs like a Mohawk, and their spindly arms went in downward right angles, ending in long spikes.

The way they had positioned themselves, it was like they were the directions on a compass, and Shephard the needle facing north. The South creature shuffled behind him, and Shephard quickly strafed to his right when he felt the sudden movement behind him. Shephard managed to catch South with the Glock as it travelled past, the bullet knocking it back and into the side of the raised SUV.

East didn't take kindly to this, and promptly leapt up on Shephard's back. He stumbled back and groped around his head. He managed to get a grip on the creature's spines and brought him up and over his head in a downward arc. West charged at him just as Shephard brought East slamming down on its' head. The pair bounced with the impact and rolled back along the ground.

A sudden burning sensation in his back made Shephard cry out, and he promptly fell to his knees. He looked around to see North landing on the other side of him, having just sliced its' way into Shephard's back. Or at least, it felt like it had. Gritting his teeth, he brought the Glock around, only for pain to lance out in his right shoulder. The force of the sharp impact knocked the pistol from his hand, sending it toppling away.

One of the creatures - West or East, he couldn't tell - had fired a sizeable spike into his shoulder, and it didn't look healthy. North took this opportunity to bring up both of its' hook-like arms. Shephard brought his arms up, pushing aside the searing pain in his shoulder to grab the claws in mid-slice. He heard a light gust of wind behind him which he now realised was the creatures firing their spikes. With a tug from his left arm, Shephard brought North around and impaled it on its' comrade's spike. The force of the impact sent North careening into the wall, impaling it there.

East started for Shephard as he turned around. With a tug of his left hand and a mighty scream, Shephard managed to slip the spike out of his shoulder. He twirled it around in his fingers until it was facing

downwards, and stabbed it straight through the oncoming East, impaling it to the ground.

The last creature, West, seemed somewhat stunned by this strange thing that had killed its' immediate family, but still seemed determined. It came at him, and Shephard reached for the wrench tucked into his belt. He brought it around with a mighty swing, the dull metal hook colliding with West with a mighty crunch, yellow blood spurting in a wide arc as it travelled through the air, over the guardrail, and onto the platform on the other side of the room.

For a time, Shephard just crouched on the floor, listening to himself breathe as he stared at the corpses around him. Eventually, he put the wrench away and hefted himself to his feet, taking extra care around his arm. Tentatively, he poked an experimental finger into the wound.

"… fuckin' Christ!" he spat, the saliva dotting on his gasmask lenses. It still hurt, all right. But still, not quite as much. The PCV was doing its' job already, and far more efficiently than HEV suits did. Once again, Shephard counted his blessings that he wasn't wearing one of those walking disasters.

Legs still shaky, he first went and picked up his Glock before continuing on onto the platform and down the corridor. His aim wasn't as good with the Glock, but hopefully the wound would be healed - or at least numb - before long. Or he could find a medic. A medic would be really good right about now.

He walked around the left corner in front of him and came face to face with two more of the spindly creatures. At the far end of the corridor, Shephard could make out a scientist cowering behind an overturned table. With a warbled growl they turned towards him. On the left hand wall, two elevator doors were open, the elevators themselves long gone. Shephard charged forward and hit the first of the creatures with a powerful drop kick, knocking it straight through the doorway and down the elevator shaft.

The other was not so easily beaten, and fired of a dart at his face. Shephard ducked and reached out for the creature as it swiped at him with its' hooks. He managed to grab the claw and quickly tossed the creature back over him and into the elevator shaft. It fell silently into the blackness inside.

Shephard got to his feet and inspected the dart in the wall. It was imbedded almost halfway. No wonder the bastard in his arm had hurt so much; these things came out with the force of an arrow from a bow.

"I don't know what's worse," a breathless, whiny force said from behind the table. Shephard turned to see a greying blonde scientist standing up and dusting off his coat. "You *soldiers* under orders to silence us," he said, his disgust with the word 'soldiers' making Shephard wince, "or these vile aliens."

Ignoring the scientist, Shephard quickly got to his feet. The scientist instantly cowered, and Shephard froze.

"I recommend," he said slowly, checking into the elevator shafts for a way up, "that you keep those kind of opinions to yourself."

"You're going to silence me now, is that it?"

"No," Shephard replied. He found what he was looking for through the right-hand doorway; a loose power cable going up the shaft. With a grip on the side of the entrance, Shephard leaned out into the shaft and looked up. There was light coming from a doorway up above. He turned back to the scientist and tossed him the Glock pistol.

"But there are other soldiers who might just kill you if you don't shut up."

He turned and pulled the cable towards him. A few good tugs confirmed its' sturdiness. After a few breaths, he started for the doorway.

"Wait."

He froze and turned around. The scientist was staring down at the weapon the soldier had handed to him.

"Why did you give me this?"

"You'll need it more than I will."

"But you're here to kill me!"

Shephard shrugged. "Not me. You must be thinking of somebody else."

"When… when the fighting started I hid myself down here. I don't think any of them above survived."

He nodded slowly, looking up. "I guess I'll see, won't I?"

With that, he launched himself out into the shaft, and started climbing. The surface was far slicker than the ropes he was used to at boot camp, but the gloves seemed to make up for that, at least a little. Eventually, after a few near-misses, Shephard reached the doorway he was looking for and managed to swing himself to the ledge. He balanced precariously on it for a few moments before managing to grab onto the doorframe and pull himself inside.

Unfortunately it was with his right arm, and as such, hurt like a bitch. Shephard was sure he heard something tear as he fell to the ground inside, gasping. He looked around as he waited for the pain to subside. The polished black and white tile floor made it seem like a kitchen complex or something. But as he started walking and peeked through the windows of the doors on either side, he realised it was more of an office complex.

Desks with still lit lamps and open books made Shephard realise just how sudden this whole thing must have been. Who the hell was responsible for this? The Freeman guy he had heard almost nothing

about? He knew that guy was involved somehow. Hell, he didn't even know what the guy looked like.

Shephard walked around a corner and found himself confronted with a barricade of tables, trash cans and vending machines. Frowning, he crept up to the barrier and tried to peek over into the room beyond. A SPAS-12 shotgun rifle nozzle greeted him, but it was quickly withdrawn. A human face quickly replaced it, the black beret he wore looking tattered and worn under the light. Somehow he had managed to grow stubble in the short time he had been in the complex.

But then again, Shephard had to remind himself that he had been unconscious for good chunk of this. Not to mention that there were soldiers arriving at the facility before him. He didn't even want to think what this guy had gone through.

The soldier turned around to speak to someone in the room with him. "It's a Corporal!"

"No shit!"

An engineer popped his head up excitedly, his eyes completely masked by the blackened goggles on his face. The chewed cigarette dangling from his mouth almost fell out when he gaped at the Corporal.

"Holy shit, you're right!" He looked back to his comrade, first, then back to Shephard. "We've been left behind as well. Stand back, we're gonna blow it!"

Shephard nodded and backed up around the corner, smiling like an idiot beneath the gasmask. God dammit, this was just what he needed. With a few good soldiers with him, he could kick the ass out of any situation.

The explosion sent chunks of metal and wood flying into the wall opposite Shephard. He quickly ran around the corner and jogged up

to the two soldiers. They seemed equally happy to see him.

"How the hell did you end up here?" he asked breathlessly, looking around the room. There was an open door on his right with the words 'MAINTANENCE DOOR' written above it. Judging from the scorch marks around it, it looked like the engineer had had his way with the door.

The engineer grinned, crumpling the cigarette between his lips even more. "First things first. I'm Andes, this is Gruber."

Shephard stuck out a grateful hand. "Corporal Adrian Shephard."

They both seemed to share a chuckle at his enthusiasm, but he didn't care. Christ, he was just happy to see some fellow soldiers.

"Well," Gruber said slowly, "Guess that makes you the ranking officer."

The look of complete terror on Shephard's face made him grateful for the gasmask. Jesus, he had to *command* these men? Be responsible for their lives? Christ, both of them looked like they had had more battle experience than three Adrian Shephards.

Andes didn't seem to notice. "Looks like *somebody* screwed up, Corporal. Seems the Brass bit off more than they can chew."

A nod was the only response the Corporal could muster. Then he numbly shook his head and tried to return himself to the conversation.

"What about Freeman?"

Gruber snorted in contempt. "Forget about Freeman. We've gotta save our own asses!"

This seemed to ring true with Andes as well, who nodded. "You with us, Corporal?"

Shephard almost felt like laughing, he was so scared. What a question. What it really meant was 'Will you take care of us, Corporal? Will you make sure we get out of here alive?' For the love of God, he was only twenty two. This was *not* something he should be having to deal with. Others should not be relying on him to save *their* asses.

He just nodded. "How long have you been here?"

"Only just arrived," Andes replied, pointing a thumb over at the broken down Maintenance door. "Missed the transport out of here, by, oh, I don't know… a few hundred metres?"

Gruber laughed. "Yeah. Had to get past these damned alien things that fired green electricity out of their hands. What the hell are we supposed to do against that, huh?"

Even though it was a question borne out of desperation, Gruber and Andes seemed to be having a good laugh about it. Shephard pointed back to the destroyed remains of the barrier.

"Then who put that up?"

The smiles of the soldiers faded, replaced by a silent solemnity. Thumbs hooked into his belt, Andes nodded over to his right. Shephard looked over. A dead security guard lay face down on the ground, a recently deceased crab creature lying eviscerated beside it.

Andes sighed. "Found that thing sucking on his head. Most twisted thing I ever saw."

"We were resting here when you came along," Gruber said quietly, looking eager to change the subject.

Shephard nodded. So that was it. He was going to have to lead these men into whatever hell awaited them above. They weren't ready for this any more than he was. They just needed some help.

Some guidance. Someone to keep them on track. Maybe that was all a good leader was; someone to distract you from all the crap that was going on around you and keep you focused on the goal.

And the goal, right now, was getting up to the surface.

Straightening his back, he pointed to a door behind Andes and Gruber, the label 'ELEVATOR ACCESS' plastered above it.

"Andes," he said, adopting the commanding voice he had only used thus far in training sessions, "get that door open. Let's get to the surface and see what we can find."

Andes seemed a little bemused by the command.

"Are you not hearing me, soldier?"

With a motion of his head that Shephard assumed accompanied a blink, Andes turned and unhooked the blowtorch from his PCV vest, quickly getting to work. Shephard and Gruber stood in silence as they watched Andes melt all the way around the perimeter of the metal door.

"Man, my dogs are *barkin',"* Gruber muttered, shuffling from foot to foot uncomfortably.

Shephard looked over at Gruber, his arms folded. He looked down to the soldiers feet, and then back up at his face again. His dogs were barking? What the flying fuck did *that* mean?

Andes flicked off his blowtorch and placed it back on his best. After pulling out his Desert Eagle, he knocked down the detached door with a firm placement of his boot and ran through. Shephard nodded for Gruber to go in first before following himself. There was only a very thin patch of carpet before the wide elevator opened up in front of them. They all stepped inside, and Shephard picked the highest floor he could.

The door closed, and after a few moments of silence, the elevator started up with a lurch.

"Uh… sir?"

Slowly, Shephard turned to face Andes.

"What's with the wrench?"

Shephard sighed.

(A/N: Well, that's your lot until after the New Year, folks! But don't despair; this isn't one of those 'I'll be back but actually I'll disappear and never finish the story' things. I fully intend to finish writing this thing, because I'm looking forward to writing Gordon's escapades in City 17. And I can't very well start doing that without finishing this, can I? That would be all kinds of wrong. Also, I always like to be a few chapters ahead of what I'm actually posting, otherwise I end up feeling rushed and the end product is something I'm less than happy with. So really, this is in everyone's best interests! For example, I'm already halfway through writing 'Lambda Core'…

So! I'll take this opportunity to say Merry Christmas, and a Happy New Year. And watch the Doctor Who special. It's the festive thing to do.

So… reviews, please!

Next Chapter: "Forget About Freeman!")

Forget About Freeman

-1Disclaimer: I don't own *Half-Life.*

(A/N: A 2008 thank you to hhgbh for beta work!)

The Black Mesa Incident

Chapter Twenty Four: "Forget About Freeman!"

Another explosion rocked the tunnel as Gordon came to small, closed off garage area. Three steps in front of him led up to a walkway. He could see that it turned left at the end, and decided that was probably a more viable option that trying to knock down a garage door. As soon as he took one step up to the walkway, the ceiling collapsed just above the entrance to the further area. Massive chunks of rock collapsed down, blocking the only exit Gordon could see.

A small frown creased the side of his mouth as he walked up to the rock, hoping to find some way over it. As he reached the boulder, the ceiling just above him collapsed down as well. Gordon grabbed onto the guardrail on his right and vaulted himself over and onto the garage floor. He could only watch as more boulders collapsed in through the ceiling with every explosion of the military's bombs.

Looking at the rock locking the corridor that led off from the walkway, Gordon saw light peeking through. Energised, he managed to scramble his way up over the guardrail and on top of the boulder. The top of his head brushed against the broken, cracked ceiling as he crouched beside the gap. There was just enough room for him to squeeze through.

The corridor rocked once more, threatening to make Gordon slip off the boulder. He latched on, for the first time cursing his HEV gloves. This was a time he really could have done with fingernails. After one

last cautious look up at the precariously shaking ceiling, Gordon slid himself through the gap sideways. He fell through into the corridor beyond in a less than graceful fashion, but he was quickly becoming used to that state of affairs.

Action Man/Killing Machine he was not.

But then again, the military seemed pretty frightened of him. Well, perhaps not frightened, but at least a little wary. That meant he was doing something well. Whether it was a good thing or not, Gordon didn't know.

After a quick adjustment of his glasses, Gordon sat up and hefted himself to his feet, continuing on into the office room beyond the corridor. Inside, a desk was pressed against the left hand wall, a now broken lamp lying toppled next to some well worn books. A book cabinet sat in front of him, a military radio crackling away on top of it. Gordon's grip on the rifle in his hands automatically tightened. He had hoped that he had seen the last of the soldiers. But then words that gave Gordon hope emerged from the radio, almost drowned out by another explosion from above.

" *Forget about Freeman! We are cutting our losses and pulling out! Anyone left down there now is on his own, repeat-"*

Gordon smiled, his grin border lining on stupidity. Ah. Success. Now all he had to worry about was killer aliens. And faulty machinery. And psychotic security guards. And-

On second thought, perhaps things weren't *that* much better. A power box with a huge, tempting lever was placed on the wall just beside the radio, and Gordon resisted the temptation to pull it down. He *really* didn't trust the track record of this place as far as puling switches and pressing buttons was concerned.

Instead, Gordon looked for the exit. On his right, several glassless (whether by design or by accident) windows overlooked a storage area, although this one was slightly smaller than the one he had

fought those military women in. At least, he *assumed* they were military women. If they weren't, the were just women in tight leather trying to kill him. Of course, if he had been a different kind of man, he probably wouldn't have minded that. Being who he was, however, it just disturbed him.

An open entrance on Gordon's right led out to a walkway that overlooked the storage room. Although overlooked was a bit of an overstatement, since it was barely a foot above ground level. The huge door on the right of the walkway that would have no doubt allowed entry by large trucks was blocked up by debris and some green organic stuff that Gordon didn't really want to think about.

He went outside and hopped over the guardrail, landing silently on the concrete floor. It was a fairly large room, the ceiling towering quite high above him. The room extended for a considerably distance in front of him, only a small part of the far right hand corner blocked by a tall crate. Just before the crate, the room split off to the right, opening up into a larger storage room.

Gordon considered simply ignoring the crate and going straight into the room on the right. But somehow that just felt dangerous. So, with a crick of his neck and a tighter grip on his rifle, Gordon slowly walked over to the crate. He pressed back to the side, and whirled around.

The blue uniform of the security guard made him relax for a few moments, when Kaufman's snarling visage flashed across his consciousness. His grip tightened.

"Whoa, whoa," she said, hands up from where she sat on the ground.

She seemed genuine enough. And somehow, Gordon wasn't getting the same weird vibe he had been from Kaufman. He slowly lowered the rifle.

"You scared the living crap out of me," she sighed, hefting herself to her feet. Her helmet dangled idly from one of her hands, revealing her short cropped hair beneath.

"Sorry."

"It's okay. Which way did you come in?"

Gordon nodded back to the office overlooking the storage bay.

"The surface?" she asked incredulously, looking him up and down.

He nodded again.

"Geez, you must be nuts."

A comment brewed in his throat, but Gordon just settled for a nod.

"I'm surprised you didn't turn on the turret, too."

Gordon instantly felt the colour drain from his face. "The… turret."

"Yeah," she said simply, pointing up to the ceiling.

He followed the single digit until he saw a large black metal circle in the ceiling. How had he not noticed that before? That must have been what the power box was for.

"Good thing you didn't, though," she continued, putting on her helmet and clipping on the chinstrap, "the targeting scanners were messed up by an explosion. If you *had* turned it on, that thing would have torn me to pieces." She smiled up at him. "And I'm way to pretty for that."

That made Gordon smile, which was a rare occurrence in itself. Except, of course, when he found out that soldiers weren't following him anymore. Or when he was making insane jumps from ledge to ledge. He smiled at the strangest things.

"Anyway," she sighed, "I suppose you'll be heading someplace, huh?"

Gordon nodded. "The Lambda Complex."

"Ah, you're here to save the planet, huh?"

"I… not really. I was just told to go there."

"By who?"

He thought about it for a moment. It was a scientist, he was sure of that. But other than that fact…

"I'm not sure."

"Oh, an absent minded professor?" She rolled her eyes. "They're a rare breed around here."

Once again, Gordon smiled.

"I'm Simone, by the way," she said, holding out her hand to him.

Gordon shook it unsurely, since the last female security guard he had come across had been somewhat less than calm.

"Gordon Freeman."

The way she gaped made Gordon feel a little cautious. *"Gordon Freeman?* You mean the guy they're after?"

"The guy they *were* after," he corrected, hoping he hadn't misheard he radio transmissions.

"Oh, as if any soldiers left behind are going to *care*," she said lightly, waving him down dismissively. She realised what she said and looked a little embarrassed. "Sorry."

He just shrugged, and pointed into the room beyond. "I need to get going now."

"Need some company?"

"I…" Gordon thought about it. Did he really need company? Anybody who had helped him so far had either ended up dead, left behind or just plain crazy.

But then again, he could do with someone to talk to.

"… yes."

Simone smiled. "Great! Let's, uh… push on, shall we? You'll probably want to get to the access hatch to the sewers."

The look of distaste on Gordon's face was not well hidden. "Sewers?"

His security guard companion seemed oblivious, however, simply nodding in reply. "Now, I *think* you can find your way through there and to an elevator… I think that'll take you straight down to the Lambda labs."

"Why haven't you gone there?" he asked gently, not wanting to sound too rude.

She shrugged. "No reason to. Pretty safe here for the time being. But then the ceiling started caving in, and I figured I should start moving soon. And then you showed up, so it seemed like fate." She smiled. "Don't you think?"

"I… suppose so." The sweet look on her face was making him blush, so Gordon coughed and pointed to where they needed to go. "So, do you want to, uh… lead on?"

"Don't mind if I do."

With a confidence in her stride that made Gordon feel a little bit better, Simone set off in front of him, walking down the wide passageway and into the storage area beyond. There were two rather large stacks of crates diagonally across the room from each other, one in the far left hand corner, and another in the near right. Gordon could see the concrete floor going down in a ramp on the far right, leading to a small road beyond.

Simone stopped and turned around, pointing a thumb over her shoulder at the ramp. "We can get down there-"

A thick brown claw suddenly whipped out from behind the corner she had positioned herself at, hitting Simone in the head and sending her flying across the room. She collided head first with the wall opposite and fell to the ground limply. Gordon rushed over to her, the unnatural way her neck was twisted obvious even from a distance. Her pale blue eyes were still open, staring up at the ceiling in wide eyed shock.

Gordon squeezed his eyes shut and bowed his head. The low growl of the large, armoured alien got him to his feet, and he turned to face the creature, M4 rifle pointed straight at its' head. It brought up its' claw and fired off several of the buzzing darts. Two went straight past him and collided with the wall. Another two hit him, one in leg and another in the stomach. Gordon didn't care. He just fired, and didn't pull his finger away from the trigger until the creature was dead, yellow blood pasted along the walls and seeping into the concrete below.

The rifle smoked in his hands. Gordon convinced himself that the tears stinging his eyes were the result of the smoke. Trying not to look at Simone's corpse, he continued on. Another teleportation behind the stack of crates on the left made him pause. Gordon looked down at his rifle, and realised he probably didn't have any bullets left. He turned, heading for the power box that would switch on the turret.

Three more portals opened, depositing two of the electricity aliens and an armoured creature between them. Gordon set his jaw, tossed away his rifle, and sprinted straight for them. The electricity aliens seemed a little taken aback by this aggressive move, their red eyes blinking once or twice in confusion. The armoured alien, however, was nowhere near as impeded, and opened fire on Gordon.

Buzzing darts slammed into him with all the force of bullets, making him stumble and falter as he continued straight for them. The electricity aliens started to follow suit, charging their attacks. Gordon had just reached the armoured alien when they were finished, and he quickly dodged around the lumbering swing the creature made for his head. He threw himself up on the glassless window ledge, managing to haul himself over and into the office beyond before the enemies behind him could do much else.

He crawled to the power box, pulled down the lever. And then he sat against the wall, eyes closed, as the turret tore the creatures apart. Their wails were almost drowned out by the continual chatter of the weapon. They sounded rather pitiable instead of threatening.

Gordon took a deep breath through his nose, resting his head back against the wall. He had decided. No more travelling companions. They either died or ended up wishing they were. For all he knew, everyone he had left behind with promises of rescue were dead. But at least they had a chance. Anyone who stuck with him… it was almost as bad as killing them himself.

The turret stopped, coming to a whining halt outside. The smell of burnt flesh reached his nostrils, as well as the acrid smoke coming from the turret. He reached up and slammed the power lever back up. After taking a shaky breath, he pulled himself to his feet, brought out the crowbar, and continued on to the corridor beyond. He stared straight at the entrance as he walked through the aftermath, ignoring human and alien corpses alike.

After walking down the ramp, Gordon found himself on a road that went both left and right. An organic wall stood in his way on the left,

a football sized, fleshy coloured sphere growing in the very centre. The way was clear to the right, and the road bent off to the left a little way down. Gordon cautiously walked to the wall, pressing an experimental hand to it. It gave slightly as he pushed, like Clingfilm. He looked the wall up and down, and surmised that if the aliens had put a wall in the wall, then that meant there was something good inside. He brought back his crowbar, and smashed it through the wall. The entire wall collapsed, including the sphere, which fell to the floor and shattered like an egg.

About half a dozen of the small red, rodent sized creatures he had come across in a ventilation shaft earlier flew out, scuttling straight for him. Gordon turned and ran. A quick look over his shoulder confirmed that the things were *fast* . They were literally nipping at his heels as he turned the corner. The road continued on to a secure looking metal garage door in the distance. On Gordon's immediate left, some steps led up to a walkway, which in turn led to a platform even further into the rock face where Gordon could see a crank coming out of the ground,

Two electricity aliens stood at the garage door, and began charging their attacks when they saw him. Another electricity alien, this one blocking Gordon's access to the stairs, brought up its' arms as though to slice the claws through Gordon. Not once stopping, Gordon swung the pointed end of the crowbar up and into the creature's chin (which, he noticed, actually its' mouth). It tore through the loose flesh, knocking the creature back and into the wall behind it. Gordon continued up onto the walkway and checked behind him. One of the creatures was still following him, but the rest had stopped to feast on the dead alien Gordon had delivered to them.

The deceased's comrades quickly rushed to the aid of their fallen friend, and, not for the first time Gordon felt a pang of guilt for what he was doing to them. He quickly turned and used the crowbar like a golf club on the small insect behind him, knocking it across the room and into the rocky wall. The impact made it explode, although it sounded more like a pop.

Gordon then reached the crank, quickly putting away his crowbar. In front of it, a closed hatch beckoned forth to him just as another explosion made the room shake violently. Pieces of the ceiling started coming down on him, and Gordon turned the crank. It only took a few turns to open the hatch wide enough for him to slip through into the tunnel below. He managed to go in feet first, but then started to fall as soon as he was through.

In the darkness, he just barely made out the shape of a ladder in front of him and reached out for it. The tough material of the HEV gloves latched on to a rung rather easily. His momentum swung him around, slamming him into the ladder with a loud clang.

"Ow."

His voice echoed down the tunnel below him and into the cavernous sewers below. At least, Gordon assumed they were cavernous from the echoes. He gripped onto another rung, ignoring the incessant bleeping of the HEV suit. It was difficult to tell his stats in the dark light, which Gordon found strange in itself; the Heads Up Display on the HEV was supposed to be retina dependant, not light dependant. But then again, the retina was light dependent, so…

He shook the conundrum from his head and climbed down. The sewer beyond wasn't particularly pleasant, but then again, Gordon wasn't expecting anything less. It wasn't enough that he be put in a trash compacter and have to negotiate his way through a waste processing plant, all in one day. No, he had to swim through a sewer as well. He could only imagine how much Barney would complain in his place. Occasionally the floor level dipped and Gordon found himself immersed in the gooey, viscous and more than a little pungent liquid.

Eventually, though, after crawling and/or swimming his way through some very hazardous looking but slow moving cogs (which really were too big), Gordon found his way to another tunnel above water level; one with a ladder inside. It mirrored the entrance he had used to enter. Daylight squeezed its' way down, and Gordon felt his heart

jump. He'd get to see the sun once more before he plunged down towards the Lambda Complex, and the whole host of problems that no doubt awaited him there.

It took him no time to climb his way to the top, and he found himself poking his head out behind an enormous rock. Behind him, a stocky rock face of a wall stood, stretching as far as he could see. He pulled himself out of the hole in the ground and onto the rocky floor. Cautiously, he allowed himself a peek out from behind the boulders that blocked his view. A road went horizontally in front of him, ending in a closed tunnel door on his right. He tried to poke his head even further to see what was on the left.

" *Move!"*

Gordon closed his eyes. "Oh… *shit…"* he groaned, hanging his head. He managed a sarcastic little smile at the truly *hilarious* hand fate had once again dealt him. More soldiers. Thank you.

Hand on his crowbar, Gordon checked his stats. Oh, even more good news. The HUD was flickering in front of his eyes, which meant the HEV suit was dangerously low on power. Which meant that, pretty soon, it would just be plain old Gordon Freeman against the world.

It wasn't a thought he particularly relished, so after a few warm up bounces, Gordon launched himself out to the left of the boulder. A tank sat stubbornly in a wide doorway, soldiers all around it. Gordon could see elevator doors in the room behind the tank. With his jaw set and his head down, he sped up, heading straight for the wall of soldiers that awaited him. There wasn't much room between him and them, so they barely had time to squeeze off one or two shots before Gordon barrelled straight into them, swinging his crowbar wildly. The mounted machinegun placement in the front of the tank fired off futilely, unable to swivel all the way around the face Gordon.

There were three soldiers, and Gordon managed to take out one straight away with the sharp end of a crowbar to the face. He went

down screaming, clutching at his torn cheek as it bled onto the concrete. Gordon stabbed the straight end of the crowbar into the thigh of another soldier, but all that elicited was a grunt before he grabbed Gordon by the arm and tossed him back and through the doorway, crowbar still in hand.

Gordon was tempted to run to the elevator doors, but he knew that the soldiers would just shoot him. And with his suit about to die on him, there was no way he could survive it.

Survival was important.

A turret, hidden around the corner of the doorway, whined to life beside him, the automated machinegun ready to do its' business. The soldiers bore down on Gordon, one falling behind from the stab wound in his leg. Gordon leapt to his feet and grabbed the first uninjured soldier by the arm, and pulled. All it took was one tug to bring the soldier towards him, and Gordon twisted him as they fell backwards so that he was between him and the turret. The red hot bullets ripped into him, and Gordon started to drag the corpse towards the elevator doors as he crawled to them. Using a human shield was not something he particularly enjoyed, and he would probably have a good vomit over it later. But right now, it was somewhat of a necessity.

The limping soldier was stuck, only able to watch as Gordon made his escape by using his comrade's body. Gordon slammed the crowbar into the down button, and the elevator doors opened almost instantly. It must have been waiting there all along. Gordon realised he probably would have been able to run for it. He crawled into the elevator and smashed the control panel on the outside just before the doors closed. Gordon gave the wounded soldier across the room an apologetic look which he was sure would only make him angrier. But, with the controls broken, he couldn't follow him down, at least.

Gordon's legs felt shaky, and things were starting to ache. Without power, the suit was beginning to falter in its' morphine administration. And soon, the electricity hardened material of his suit would fade to

rubber, leaving him very vulnerable. The elevator dinged as it reached the floor below.

The suit's Geiger counter was still, working obviously. The sudden, vicious crackle made Gordon duck his head and hold his crowbar up defensively before he realised what it was. Glowing radioactive liquid bathed the floor of the tunnel ahead of him. From the looks of things, though, he was definitely getting close to the Lambda Complex. The tunnel itself was a grand light blue metal, arching over him in a large semi-circle. He could see advanced control panels (albeit damaged) in the distance. Invigorated, Gordon looked to the floor for some way to traverse pools of glowing liquid. He smiled as he saw his answer. Every now and then, there was an 'island' of ordinary floor, at least big enough for him to put two feet on. There was certainly enough for him to hop his way to the end of the corridor.

After a few mistrials (and a few near misses), Gordon started to get the hang of it, and was soon at the far end of the corridor, crowbar still clutched in his gloved fist as a balancing aid. Gordon looked over to his left and saw the source of the leak; a large yellow tanker had been cracked around the side. A security guard lay dead in the ooze that dripped out, almost impossible to see amongst the blinding glow.

Gordon turned to look down the other end of the corridor. Just one more leap, and he would be walking on normal ground. Crowbar now held with both hands like sword, Gordon walked down the corridor and followed it around the bend to the left. The corridor continued to snake on ahead of him, eventually going right in the distance. But on his upcoming left, stairway seemed to hold much more promise.

Once up the stairs, Gordon walked right into another room, the lights completely gone. He resisted the temptation to activate his flashlight; he needed to conserve energy for petty little things like bullets and electricity blasts.

And now he was talking about electricity blasts as fact. Wonderful.

The sound of the armoured aliens' insect darts weapon made him freeze. It was quickly followed by deafening machinegun fire and the gurgling of the electricity alien. Gordon got down on all fours and crawled towards the doorway. It led out onto a walkway that was horizontally in front of him. It overlooked a room beyond, which he presumed was a fuelling station for whatever vehicles the Lambda Complex staff used.

A tank - Gordon was getting annoyed with these now - was placed on the left hand side of the room, facing opposite an archway on the far right. There were two archways in the wall there, but the tank seemed to be focused on the one in the very right corner. It was sealed off by a very secure looking metal door, but Gordon presumed that it wouldn't be much trouble for a tank. With a low moan, the last of the armoured aliens died, flopping down to the ground in a loose sitting position as it did so.

Gordon counted three soldiers. Two hopped up onto the tank and climbed inside. Another seemed content to sit on the back while the tank driver got to work. He sat down, back to the action and got to work lighting a cigarette. Crowbar at the ready, Gordon got to his feet and leapt off the walkway, landing on the uneven surface of the tank in a crouch.

Just as he landed, the tank fired off a blast which blew up the metal door blocking the archway. The soldier lighting his cigarette turned around, scowling.

"What the fuck are you trying to-?!"

He froze upon seeing Gordon, who was now well and truly ready for a fight. Without pause, Gordon swung the crowbar like a golf club, hitting him around the temple with the blunt end and knocking him straight off the tank, unconscious. The monstrous vehicle below him took that moment to lurch forward, heading for the now open archway.

Gordon heard laughing coming from inside the tank, and another soldier, this one wearing a gas mask, pulled himself out so that only his torso was outside.

"You like that, Bri-"

He lost his voice when he saw Gordon standing over him, bringing the crowbar down on his head with a two handed slam.

"Oh, shit!"

Gasmask quickly fell back down, missing the crowbar by inches. The tank continued on for the archway, heedless of its' new passenger. As it entered the archway of a tunnel, the soldier re-emerged, Machete knife held up and ready to intercept his crowbar. Gordon backed up as the soldier slowly pulled himself out of the tank. They both had to crouch to allow the archway to go over their heads.

The tank started to edge out into the corridor beyond. There wasn't enough room for the entire tank to turn either way, but the cannon could. Gordon spotted the aliens on the left at the far end of the corridor immediately. There were two of the armoured aliens stood beside a machine which could have been manmade or alien-made, he wasn't sure. Gasmask took this moment of distraction to heart and stabbed at him with the Machete. Gordon managed to parry the blow with his crowbar, but they both fell to their backs on the hard metal of the tank. The Machete scraped against the metal of the crowbar as Gasmask pushed down towards him.

A blue laser from the alien's machine hit the wall the tank had found itself wedged against, and it toppled. Gordon shifted his weight and slammed his knee up into Gasmask's groin. He grunted and released Gordon, giving him enough time to roll away and to the ground. The wall landed with a resounding crash just as Gordon hit the ground. A muffled cry was all he heard from Gasmask as he was crushed beneath the concrete.

His gaze whipped up to the aliens at the other end of the corridor. Suddenly, they exploded, the sound from the tank causing Gordon physical pain. He covered his ears with his gloved hands as he watched the aliens and their device be blown to pieces. And then there was silence, and Gordon knew why. The soldier piloting the tank was waiting for him. There wasn't anywhere else he could go; the collapse of the wall had pretty much blocked the tunnel, and if he went straight on down the corridor (which he was sure was his destination anyway) he would just get blown to bits.

Gordon slipped his crowbar back into place and looked back to the tank. He could make out the hand of Gasmask, limply hanging out of the debris. A sudden idea exploding in his brain, Gordon rapidly shifted as much of the concrete as he could away and reached underneath the rubble, searching by touch. Finally, he found what he was looking for, and pulled it out; a grenade.

He pulled the pin and ran. As he passed the tip of the tank's cannon, he shoved the grenade inside, and kept on running. He was only a few paces away before the overzealous driver fired. The explosion knocked Gordon from his feet and tossed him up into the air. He hit the ground at speed and at an angle, managing to turn the impact into a roll that ended at the wall.

Glasses slightly ajar, Gordon just lay there for a few moments, taking in the flaming tableau before him.

Gordon Freeman, scientist, with a PhD in Theoretical Physics, had just blown up a tank. There was something wrong with how happy that made him feel, but he sure as hell wasn't going to analyse it now. Gripping onto one of the metal rungs that ran along the wall, Gordon tugged himself to his feet. His eyes were feeling heavy. He had been running on adrenaline and suit power for so long now. He either needed a few days sleep or a recharge from a HEV power station.

He knew which one he would prefer, definitely. But somehow, he knew which one he would *get* .

He followed the corridor around the bend and to some doors that looked so secure and mighty, he was either entering a space age castle… or he was finally here. A cautious, shaky hand reached for the large yellow button on the wall. He pressed it down with one finger, and the doors opened. A smile wormed its' way onto his face, and he sighed in relief. He had reached his goal. The goal that had powered him through two days of hell.

The Lambda Complex.

(A/N: Hope everyone had a good time over the holidays. But life moves on, and, as promised, the story continues.

As always, reviews welcome!

Next Chapter: Friendly Fire)

Friendly Fire

Disclaimer: I don't own *Half-Life.*

(A/N: Thanks, as per usual, to hhgbh for beta-ing!)

The Black Mesa Incident

Chapter Twenty Five: Friendly Fire

After explaining the presence of a red wrench tucked into his belt, Shephard only had a few moments to himself before the elevator came to a halt at the highest floor it could manage. It likely wasn't the surface, but they could probably climb their way up if they had to.

A polite bing echoed through the room, and the doors opened. Shephard had positioned himself around the left-hand corner, with Gruber and Andes on the right. The doors now open and waiting, Shephard listened for anything suspicious. Nothing. He poked his head around quickly. Dull green carpet stretched out into the room before him. A stairway went up and around, spiralling onto a balcony that overlooked the entrance to the elevator. Another stairway ascended from the balcony, leading to a walkway with one door at the end.

Shephard assumed that the higher they were the better. He gave Gruber the all clear with an authoritative nod, and the engineer returned the gesture before whirling around the corner, Desert Eagle at the ready. A blast of green electricity hit him in the chest, hurling him across the room and into the back wall of the elevator. The thin metal dented with the impact.

Gruber, ignoring the danger, ran straight to the inert body of his friend and came to a skidding halt down beside him.

"Shit!" Shephard spat, whipping his machete out of it's sheath on his boot. He whirled around the corner, and instantly saw the electricity

alien that stood on the balcony. How the hell had he missed that thing standing there?

He brought the machete back to toss it straight at the creature, years of training and uncanny fighting instinct assuring him the blade would land dead centre in the creature's eye.

The knife never left his hand. A spray of shotgun pellets ripped into the creature, throwing it back and spraying yellow blood everywhere in a moist cloud. Shephard looked back to the red-eyed Gruber, his chest heaving from either weeping or exertion. Probably both.

Alien grunts sounded from further up the stairs. They were coming from the room on the top floor. With only a quick glance at Shephard, Gruber rushed out of the elevator and into the complex beyond, heading straight for the stairs.

"Come on, you bastards! Try that with me!"

Shephard tried to think of something to say to stop Gruber. But nothing came out. Nothing sounded adequate. Instead, he slipped the machete back into his boot and walked to the dead body of Andes. He knelt down beside him and futilely checked for a pulse.

Nothing.

As if it would have been anything else. His PCV should have protected him. Why the hell wasn't it working?

"Why?" He gripped Andes by the shoulders. "Why wasn't it working, you idiot? You… fucking… idiot…"

His breathing became more laboured his emotions bubbled to the surface. Andes was his responsibility. He had only known him for a few minutes, but he had still looked to Shephard for guidance and safety. Why the hell hadn't he seen that thing on his first recon?

Gunfire sounded from the corridor above, Gruber's screams merging with the din to become a continuous roar. Shephard blinked the wetness in his eyes away and searched Andes' body for ammunition. He found a few clips for the Desert Eagle, loaded up, and headed out of the elevator.

Andes' cigarette burned on the floor just in front of the elevator doors where he had been standing. Shephard delicately pressed down on the tip with his boot before glancing back to his fallen comrade. He turned around and ran up the stairs. He saw the elevator doors close as he reached the top walkway.

A low, angered growl emerged from the corridor beyond, and Shephard rushed through. Far ahead of him, Gruber stood in front of a towering brown beast of an alien, black armour plating around different parts of its' body. Shephard sprinted ahead, and could only watch as the creature picked up Gruber by the legs and torso. The screams echoed down the corridor and burnt Shephard's ears as he saw the creature tear Gruber in two.

The creature let the legs hit the wall beside it, but kept hold of Gruber's lifeless torso long enough to throw it out of a window on the other wall.

With a roar that emerged from someplace deep inside him, someplace he never knew he had, Shephard charged the monster. He leapt up onto the creature, grabbing onto the armour plating on its' back for leverage as he jammed the Desert Eagle down its' three-sided maw. He pulled the trigger.

Again.

And again.

He kept on firing until the weapon in his hand clicked helplessly, its' ammunition spent. Shephard stood over the creature, staring down at its' obliterated face and the yellow blood that pooled around his boots.

"Hope that hurt, fucker," he snarled, giving the head a vicious kick before turning to the window.

He didn't even want to look down. Christ, what if Gruber was still alive? That happened, didn't it? People blown into pieces by bombs and live to tell the tale. Below him was a small, contained rocky area. In a messy, bloody puddle almost directly in the middle, Shephard made out the still remains of the soldier he had been talking to barely moments before.

The slightest whisper of a gasp reached his ears from down below. He was still alive. And he was saying something.

Shephard crouched down and tilted his head.

"Please…"

The young soldier pushed himself back away from the broken window, shaking his head.

"No, no…"

He instinctively turned to some closed double doors, intent on getting to the surface and finding some help. But the words echoed in his head. He scrunched up his face, forcing the tears back into his eyes. He took a long breath, turned, and stormed to the window, loading and cocking the Desert Eagle as he went.

Without pause, Shephard aimed the gun and fired three times.

For a few moments, he just stood there, staring straight out into the space ahead of him. A few thin slits in the rock face revealed what looked like a tunnel running alongside it. That was probably where he was headed.

He nodded, eyes closed. Good. Focus on the task, not the details.

Details like letting two soldiers die.

An alien gurgle sounded from the double doors behind him. Shephard opened his eyes, his jaw clenched so hard it almost hurt. He reloaded the Desert Eagle and ran shoulder first into the doors, knocking them from their hinges.

A long conference table stretched out in front of him, a lit projector screen blankly flickering at the far end of the room. There were three aliens; one stood on the table, and two flanking it on either side. Shephard killed the middle one first, knocking it back and off the table. The second shot was to the creature on the left. On Shephard's right, the last remaining creature had taken the time to charge up an attack.

Shephard lashed out with his leg, kicking one of the chairs straight into the creature's face, interrupting the charging process. It knocked the offending piece of furniture out of the way with a swipe of its' arms, its' red eyes widening as it came face to face with Shephard, who had followed the chair. He grabbed onto the wrench with his left hand, swinging it around and hitting the creature in the side of the head. The force of the impact forced it into the wall, flattening the head like an egg.

He lingered for only a moment before tugging the weapon from the wall and slipping it back into his belt. Another gurgle hit his ears, and Shephard brought the Desert Eagle up again, gripping it with both hands. It was coming from behind the projector screen. Green electricity gathered from invisible points all around the room, focusing on one point behind the screen. The experience made the hairs on his arms stand on end.

He barely noticed.

With an angry snarl, a green bolt of energy sprung through the white material. Shephard threw himself back, watching as the lightning exploded against the wall, leaving a sizeable burn mark. He brought the Desert Eagle up at the now exposed alien and shot it through the head.

For a few seconds, Shephard allowed himself the brief respite of simply sitting on the carpeted floor, feeling the air entering and leaving his lungs. Finally, remembering who he was and what he was supposed to be doing, he pushed himself to his feet. He was a soldier. He was going to do his duty.

He turned and walked back into the corridor. Gruber had dropped his shotgun the minute the creature had picked him up. Slowly, he knelt down and picked the weapon up. There wasn't a trace of blood on it. He emptied the weapon to see how much he had left. Only one cartridge. It was barely worth taking with him, but something… either the desire to honour the memory of Gruber and Andes, or simply the comforting feel of the weapon in his hands… either way, something was pushing him to take it with him. So he loaded up the single cartridge.

Another open door beside the conference room drew him inside. Two long dead scientists lay on the ground of the small office, their desks splattered with blood. Whether it was aliens or soldiers that did this, Shephard wasn't sure. The very thought of the latter sickened him, but the former wasn't exactly preferable either. A diagram on the wall drew his attention.

'The Displacer'. What the hell was a displacer? The picture on the wall looked like some kind of weapon, but… not like anything Shephard had ever seen before. It looked more like some elaborate vacuum cleaner than anything else. He shook his head and returned to the corridor, looking for a way out. Another quick glance into the conference room revealed some double doors off to the right that he hadn't noticed during his initial entrance.

Hardly surprising.

He walked out into the corridor beyond. There were a few doors dotted around on either side of the corridor, all of them leading to equally bland and useless offices. Finally, he was left with only one door stood at the far end of the corridor, staring at him enticingly. He

had started towards it when he heard the distinctive whine of a falling bomb.

Shephard turned and ran. The bomb landed with a thunderous bang, shaking the foundations of the corridor and knocking him off course, sending him scraping into the wall. The red door flew off its' hinges, whirling past Shephard and crashing down along the floor. Smoke billowed out behind it, filling the air around Shephard. He futilely tried to wave it away from his face as he made his way towards the now destroyed office.

Inside, Shephard could make out some huge structure diagonally coming down through the destroyed ceiling. His boots crunched against the collapsed roof tiles, turning them to powder beneath his feet. Sunlight filtered through the steadily thinning cloud, and Shephard could only smile at the sight, despite of everything he had gone through in the past few minutes. There was something so simple about the sun, so life-affirming. It gave him the smallest glimmer of hope, somehow.

The structure in front of him eventually revealed itself to be a collapsed electrical tower. Shephard poked it with an experimental finger for any current before gripping it more tightly in his fist. He was about to start up when he noticed someone staring at him out of the corner of his eye. Or rather, a picture of somebody. On the wall, the picture frame cracked and off-kilter, Gordon Freeman stared dully back at him. The words 'EMPLOYEE OF THE MONTH' were adorned beneath him.

Shephard let go of the electrical tower to take a look at the man all of his comrades seemed intent on killing. He didn't look so dangerous. Freeman looked alarmed by the fact that anyone was even taking a picture of him, so his reaction to being shot at… *This* was the guy who his fellow soldiers were after? Why? If this guy had killed any soldiers, it surely must have been by accident. Because Shephard knew he would be able to kill this skinny, pasty little guy with his eyes closed.

"Scientists…" he muttered, shaking his head as he remounted the electrical tower and climbed his way up, shotgun tucked under his arm.

As soon as the sun pricked against the exposed skin of his arms, Shephard longed to remove his mask and feel it against his face. But training held steadfast, and he continued climbing up until he was on the surface. He hopped down onto the concrete floor. He was in a small, closed off area. A tall, barbed fence stood on his left, blocking the way to the rocky passage beyond. The other three sides of the square Shephard found himself in were taken up by a warehouse of a building. He heard a footstep on his left, and whirled the shotgun around to meet it.

A military medic, seemingly oblivious to the weapon being pointed at him, scowled at Shephard admonishingly.

"What the hell were you doing down there?" He sounded like he was scolding a misbehaving child. Shephard even felt a little ashamed as he lowered the shotgun.

The medic groaned and rubbed his eyes behind his glasses. "Listen, we need to get our asses down to the extraction point near Lambda sector." He pointed over his shoulder to a locked door in the building beside the fence. Above the door, a yellow sign read 'LAMBDA SECTOR TRANSIT SYSTEM'. Shephard walked past the medic to the door, running his hand down the smooth metal surface. An extraction point. A way out. A *goal* . Something every soldier needed. The medic walked up behind him.

"With any luck we'll even get a shot at Freeman on the way out," he sneered, sounding like so many other soldiers Shephard had known in his time, desperate to accomplish their mission and go home in glory. Shephard turned around to look at him as he continued talking.

"Now, this transit system should take us there, but… the door's sealed up pretty tight. Where's an engineer when you need one, eh?"

The thought of an engineer just made Shephard think of Andes, so he returned his attention to the door. He propped his shotgun up against the wall beside it so he could study the door more thoroughly.

"I've already tried that, sir. There's nothing. There's a door going into that part of the building, but it's locked up tight as well."

Shephard, now crouched on the ground in front of the door, turned to look up at him. "Then how did you get here?"

His companion nodded to the fence. "Managed to get myself over that. PCV does wonders against barbed wire," he said, knocking a fist against the hard material with a wink.

"So we're not getting out that way."

"No, sir."

Shephard stood up and stretched out a hand to the medic. "Adrian Shephard."

The medic stared down at the hand for a brief moment, then took it, shaking it only once. "Simon Robbins. Most people call me Robber."

"Why?"

"If I told you, you'd just get embarrassed."

His frown was hidden behind his gasmask, but still, Shephard figured that Robbins probably felt his discomfort from the knowing smile on his face. Shephard picked up his shotgun and started walking around the area, looking for some other way out. Robbins followed around behind him.

"Robbins."

"Yeah?"

"Who is Gordon Freeman, anyway?"

"His name's Gordon?"

Shephard looked over at him with a cocked eyebrow, concealed as it was. "You didn't know that?"

"Well… no, sir. All I've heard is that some guy called Freeman started this whole thing. Sabotaged the facility, and then went on a killing rampage with a crowbar."

"A *crowbar?"*

Robbins shrugged. "Some people are saying he's from the government. That's how he's been able to kill so many soldiers."

"What, like Black Ops?"

"Exactly."

This elicited a rare smile from Shephard, who just shook his head with a snort.

"Well, no matter what you believe sir, what we *do* know is that he started the whole thing, and he killed more than a few soldiers on his way out."

"Where is he now?"

"Since most of us pulled out? No clue, sir."

Shephard nodded, blowing out a weary breath as he walked around the gaping hole in the ground beneath him. As he came around to the other side, he spotted an air vent shaft poking out of the wall and bending down into the ground. It had been cracked open by the falling bomb, leaving just enough room for someone to crawl inside. He pointed out the opening to Robbins, who nodded.

"I'll do recon and see if I can unlock one of these doors."

Robbins seemed reluctant at first, but then simply nodded. From what Shephard could see, he only had standard Glock firearm. That wouldn't make Shephard too confident either, in his place. He had to climb into the gap one leg at a time, eventually wriggling his way through. Right now, he found himself grateful he didn't have his backpack to lug around. What the hell had happened to that, anyway? The scientists who rescued him must have taken it. Or cut him out of it to save him, who knew.

Shephard reached up and flicked on his IR goggles as he crawled forward into the shaft. It turned a rather sharp corner to the right and to the left, but Shephard could only see light coming from the latter. When he reached the turning, he found that the roof of the vent suddenly raised, giving him enough room to stand. This extended back to the right, but not to the left. But still, he could see light coming from a grate on the left, so he stayed in the crawling position.

Finding the experience surprisingly noiseless, Shephard crawled up to the grate. He flicked off the goggles to get a better look at the expansive warehouse. A military van was parked a few metres in front of him. In front of that, even closer to Shephard and with their backs to him, two soldiers stood. But something looked off about them… their uniforms, for one. He mentally shrugged. Soldiers were soldiers. He reached forward to pry the grate off.

"Why do we always have to clean up a mess the grunts can't handle?"

Shephard's hand froze at the sound of the voice. What?

The soldier beside him spoke up. "Tell me about it. I just want to deliver the package and get out of here."

"Yeah. Sooner or later the grunts are going to figure it out."

Slowly, Shephard released his grip on the bars of the grate. Shit. Shit, shit, shit. There *were* Black Ops here.

"Still," the other said, "I wouldn't mind a chance to go up against some of them. See what they're teaching the HECU these days."

"Just find out what's taking so long."

And they were… the Black Ops were here *against* them. Shephard clenched his jaw and scrunched his eyes shut. What the hell was wrong with these people? First his unit had been sent in to 'silence witnesses', and now *they're* targets too? He watched blankly as one of the soldiers wandered off to the right, leaving his friend by himself.

Slowly, Shephard backed up down the shaft until he could stand up, eventually reversing into the wall. Those bastards… all Shephard had ever done is follow orders. And now he was being killed for doing that? Some fucker in a suit was probably behind this. Who figured that ordinary soldiers wouldn't be able to keep their mouths shut about what they had seen. It was probably *that* fucker in the suit. That grey skinned, smirking weasel of a civil servant.

The thought of that bastard with his smirk and neatly pressed suit forced Shephard to grip his shotgun as tight as he could. It was already cocked. He straightened up, cricked his neck, and then launched into a dead sprint, turning it into a slide as he reached the lowered ceiling of the vent ahead of him.

His boots knocked the vent grate from the wall, and Shephard slid out just behind the lone Black Ops soldier. Shephard fired off the only shot the rifle in his hands could manage, blasting the soldier's head clean off. His companion, only a few metres away, quickly turned upon hearing the commotion. Shephard rolled over and jammed the nozzle of the shotgun between the bars of the fallen grate.

He whirled around, the momentum tossing the grate from the rifle and sending it twirling towards his enemy. It hit the Black Ops direct in the rifle, knocking his aim upwards and sending a few bullets into the roof. Shephard took the opportunity and slipped out his Desert

Eagle. He fired off three shots, two hitting the soldier in the vest before the third blasted right through his forehead.

Shephard got to his feet and looked around the area. Just in front of him, the room expanded off to the right. A large missile lay beside him in a rack rising out of the floor, ready for transport. A metal thunk beside him drew Shephard's attention down. A grenade clattered to the ground beneath the van.

Without pause, Shephard sprinted as fast as his booted feet would allow. The explosion knocked him from his feet, warm air blasting him from his feet and onto his front. He heard the van crash down to the ground as he pushed himself up into a crouching position. A noise from his right made him whip around, Desert Eagle at the ready. The Black Ops soldier waiting there batted the weapon from his hand, sending it hurtling across the room and towards the flaming wreck of the van.

Shephard struck out with his left arm, knocking the soldier's rifle arm up, lodging a few misdirected bullets in the roof. He followed it up with a right hook to the face and a quick jab of a kick to the kneecap. Latching onto the Black Ops' gun-holding wrist with his left hand, Shephard drove his fist into the elbow joint, a cringe-worthy pop accompanying the blow. An elbow to the face made the soldier completely release rifle, and Shephard quickly whirled it around and blew holes through the soldier's head.

He took a breath. That was three down, but he was fairly sure that grenade had come from the other side of the warehouse. With his back to one of the immense missiles, Shephard poked his head around the corner. Two soldiers were making their way around the inferno of the van, their vision of him obscured by the bright flames.

After a quick look around to survey the area, Shephard looked to the missile he was hiding behind and clambered on top, only then noticing that it was dangerously close to the burning remains of the van. The two soldiers were only just walking by the missile. He chose the one that was trailing behind. Shephard ran along the

length of the rocket, leapt off, and smashed down the butt of the rifle on the back of the soldier's head. He went down with only the slightest of grunts, but it was enough for the soldier in front to hear.

The Black Ops whirled around just as Shephard did the same, their rifles pointed at one another's heads with complete accuracy. For a few moments that felt like hours, they simply stayed in that position, Shephard kneeling and aiming upwards, the Black Ops soldier standing and aiming downwards.

Shephard whipped the nozzle of his rifle left at the Black Ops' gun, and his enemy fired. One of the bullets chipped against the vest of his shoulder, while the rest found themselves embedded in the wall beside them. His hands a blur, Shephard whipped out the machete from his boot and slashed it across the soldier's knees, sending him stumbling back with only the barest grunts of pain. These bastards were trained well. Shephard wanted to see how well.

Before the Black Ops could even contemplate aiming, Shephard tossed the machete into his right knee, bringing him down with a louder - but still restrained - grunt. Shephard ended it with a few bullets through the neck and the head.

Shephard closed his eyes and took some deep breaths. That hadn't been particularly easy. One slip up and they would have killed him within a few seconds. Hopefully they were only sent to the facility in small groups. If they had been sent in the same numbers as the HECU had been… Shephard doubted many people would get out alive.

And what the hell was 'the package'? Obviously something secret, since they were using code even amongst their own company. Shephard hoped he would never find out. He had enough rattling around his brain without super secret government conspiracies. Shephard clenched his teeth.

But that was what this was, wasn't it? The government conspiring against their own people. Killing their own citizens and civil

servants… for what? Was whatever the hell was going on here worth the deaths of so many people.

A muffled, pained groan brought Shephard out of his musings. Even though reason told him that Black Ops soldiers would have attacked him by now, he still cautiously held up the M4 as he made his way around the missile. It was coming from behind a metal door in the wall, the simplistic, two buttoned control panel making Shephard feel even more uneasy. Weapon pointed at the door, Shephard reached out and pressed the button.

With a rusty groan, the door shuddered to life and rolled up into the wall, steadily revealing a bleeding form sat against a wall in the small storage room inside. It was an engineer, the blowtorch slotted into his vest immediately drawing Shephard's eye. What were the odds?

Letting his rifle fall, Shephard was by the soldier's side almost instantly.

"Are you okay soldier?"

Slowly, the engineer's goggle-obscured face lolled up to look at him. "Corporal…" he said, staring at Shephard's nametag. His eyes drifted up to look at the Shephard. "I don't think I'm gonna make it… I need a medic *bad…"*

"There's one close by. I'll go get him." Shephard sprang to his feet and ran out the door. He stopped in the doorway and turned back to the engineer. "Don't die, all right?"

That brought a smile to his face. "That an order?"

"Yeah."

"Good… because I haven't disobeyed an order in my life."

Shephard nodded and sprinted to the air vent. He paused. How the hell was medic going to get through there with all his supplies? It

was probably possible, but the time it would take…

Cursing, Shephard turned and started exploring the warehouse. At the very far side, Shephard came across a door leading out into a corridor. Two explosive laser trip-mines awaited him, their familiar blue laser making Shephard back up a pace or two. Going back to the fallen bodies of the Black Ops soldiers, he pulled off one of their boots and returned to the booby-trapped corridor. A well placed toss rid of him of that particular obstacle, the explosion leaving his ears ringing and his eyes slightly dazzled, even behind the lenses of his gasmask.

He continued on around the corridor, an automatic turret greeting him this time. However, it was pointing down another corner, and as Shephard walked up beside it, he saw that it was pointing at a door. A red laser sensor lay just in front of the door, and would obviously trigger when hit. It was a good thing Shephard had mistaken that door for locked when he was on the other side. He lifted his leg to kick the turret over, but then, thinking better of it, simply picked it up and turned it until it was facing the corner of the corridor.

With the barest hint of a smile on his lips, Shephard went through the jammed door shoulder first, scaring the living crap out of Robbins waiting on the other side. Robbins, who had been sat idly against the air vent Shephard had used to get inside, was instantly on his feet, sidearm at the ready. When he recognised the Corporal, his demeanour relaxed considerably.

"Jesus, Corporal…" He shook his head. "What happened in there? You were gone for way too long."

Shephard, slightly breathless, shook his head. "No time. I've got an injured soldier in here."

That seemed to instantly bring Robbins out of his relaxed state, his back instantly becoming rigid as a metal pole.

"Lead the way, sir."

Shephard did, not once looking back to check whether the medic was following. Even though he could feel Robbins' desire for answers as soon as he saw the Black Ops soldiers, Shephard kept on powering to their goal. Priorities. When they finally reached the injured soldier, Robbins just tutted and shook his head, as though a grease monkey looking over an damaged car. After dismounting his backpack, he made his way over to the grateful looking engineer, rifling around in his bag for some medical implement or another.

"Don't worry soldier, I'll have you fixed up in no time."

Rather than stand over them and possibly hinder the process, Shephard let Robbins get to it and stood guard outside. His eyes felt like they were glued to the missile. There was something about it and this 'package' that sent shivers down his spine. Were they linked?

He must have been theorising for longer than he thought, because Robbins light tap on his shoulder was greeted with an instinctive aiming of his rifle.

The medic put his hands up. "Whoa, whoa, calm down, Corporal. It's not like I'm one of them, after all," he said, pointing to two of the dead Black Ops soldiers.

Shephard ignored the thinly veiled question and nodded to the storage room. "How is he?"

A heavy hand clapped down on Robbins shoulder, quickly followed by a grinning, clean shaven engineer. Although his skin still looked a little pale, he seemed much better than he had been. That wasn't hard, though, admittedly.

"Thanks, doc!"

"Not a problem," he said, heading back into the room to gather his things.

The engineer thrust out a gloved hand, which Shephard took gladly.

"Tim Schwarz."

"Adrian Shephard."

"And a Corporal, too!" He said, tapping Shephard's nametag appreciatively. "I could use someone to give me some orders."

"How did you end up in there, anyway?"

"Alien things, sir. They massacred my platoon and then left us for dead. Then these Black Ops bastards arrived and I managed to hide myself inside before they noticed me."

"How did you know they weren't here to help?"

Schwartz snorted a laugh. "I could ask you the same thing."

Shephard conceded that point with a sideways nod. Before he could say anymore, Robbins emerged from the storage room, adjusting the strap on his right shoulder as he stood beside them.

"Speaking of which, Corporal, what the hell exactly is going on here?"

"Let's walk and talk, shall we?" Schwartz suggested, gesturing to the other side of the warehouse.

All of them in agreement, they started their journey to the locked Lambda Sector door outside. As they entered the now safe corridor, Robbins re-initiated the conversation.

"Well? They're Black Ops, I gathered that much."

"All I heard…" Shephard said slowly, each word feeling laboured. He felt like he was divulging something he shouldn't. "… was two of them talking about a 'package' they needed to deliver. And I *think* it was something to do with the missile in there."

"I was gonna ask about that, sir," Schwartz said as they exited the corridor and emerged out into the sun. "That missile was bigger when I closed the door."

Both Shephard and Robbins turned to look at him.

"How much bigger?" Robbins asked, his frown the most evident and undisguised of the group.

"Pretty much the…" Schwartz paused to gulp, his mouth suddenly seeming dry. "Just the warhead."

"Oh, shit…" Robbins breathed, closing his eyes and walking away while he rubbed his face.

"You think it was nuclear?" the engineer asked, the thin line of his mouth creasing as the looked from Robbins to Shephard.

Shephard looked at the two of them. They both seemed pretty intent on looking to him for answers. He took a deep breath.

"I think… we should get to Lambda Sector and get the hell out of this place. That way, once we're gone… who gives a shit?"

This course of action agreed with both of them, because Robbins pulled out his firearm while Schwartz lit his blowtorch. He strode to the door slowly, reminding Shephard that his engineer wasn't exactly in good shape. They would have to move slowly. That made Schwartz a liability in any combat situation.

Shephard shook his head. What the hell was wrong with him? That wasn't anything he had ever thought before. But then again, this was the first time he had been in such a desperate situation before. He had been stranded behind enemy lines before, definitely. Without food, water or communication with base. But he had always felt assured that when he got home, he would be welcomed with open arms. Now he just felt abandoned and alone, no matter how many soldiers were around him. It wasn't something he had been trained

for, or prepared for in any way. He had always believed in his country, and his cause.

What the hell did he have to believe in now? What was his purpose?

Schwartz grinned toothily over his shoulder at Shephard as he reached the door. "Who needs a locksmith, eh, Corporal?"

And there it was. That was his purpose. To keep these people alive. They needed him to give them orders. What kind of a man would he be if he left them to die?

Before long, Schwartz was done. With a sharp kick, he brought the door down. The high pitched beep of a laser sensor being triggered hit Shephard's ears, and he launched forward, hand outstretched and warning on his lips.

Dozens of high powered bullets tore through Schwartz before Shephard had even taken two steps towards him. Shephard dove to the side of the doorway, pressing his back to the wall. Robbins did the same on the other side, and they looked at each other over the dead body of their fellow soldier.

"Grenade!" Shephard screamed, and the medic nodded, pulling one from his vest. With a ferocity he hadn't though possible from someone like Robbins, the medic ripped off the pin and tossed the grenade down the corridor. After a few moments, the explosion was met by a deafening silence. All either of them could concentrate on was Schwartz's corpse, lying between them.

Head bowed, Robbins clutched onto the engineers' vest. Shephard could only imagine how he felt. To save someone's life and then have them ripped away so quickly…

And now that was three people Shephard had let die. Suddenly his Corporal rank was seeming like some sick joke by his superiors. Unsurely, he lay a hand on Robbins shoulder.

"Robbins," he urged, making his voice as gentle as possible.

No reply.

"Robbins."

Still nothing. If anything, he had curled up even tighter.

"Robbins! Get up!"

This grabbed his attention. His head immediately whipped up to meet his gaze.

"Stand up, soldier! We have to keep moving!"

Robbins stepped over Schwartz's body and put his face as close to Shephard's as he could manage with the gasmask in the way. "Do you really think I give a *shit* about rank right now?"

"Probably not," Shephard admitted, his voice gentle again, "but we still need to keep moving, whether I make you do it or not."

The staring contest went on for a few seconds before Robbins gave one last mournful look to the body below him and walked into the corridor beyond. Shephard knelt beside Schwartz.

"Sorry, soldier."

He stood up and followed the medic inside. They walked in silence down the corridor until it bent off to the left, going down some stairs and then going to the right again. Robbins seemed reluctant to go down, so Shephard led the way. A scuffling noise came from around the corner, and he pressed his back to the wall, waving to Robbins to do the same. After a brief countdown in his head, Shephard whirled around the corner with his rifle firmly buried in his shoulder.

Two soldiers, one wearing a bandana and another a gasmask with his helmet, stood in the corner of the corridor. Bandana seemed less

surprised than outraged by Shephard's sudden entrance. His eyes glanced down to Shephard's nametag before he spoke.

"Corporal, *what the hell* is going on here? Nobody told us about Black Ops in the mission briefing!"

Gasmask was preoccupied covering the exit of the corridor, only partially glancing over at Shephard before whipping his gaze back outwards. "Yeah, I mean we're all the same team, right? *Right?"*

"Well I'm not sure what *their* mission is, but *we* need to keep moving!" Bandana barked, spittle flying across the room. "There's got to be a transit car somewhere on these tracks," he said, nodding to the exit of the corridor.

Shephard stepped around the corner and saw that a rail ran across parallel from him into a tunnel on his right. A safety crossing in front of him led to another section of pavement on the other side, this running alongside the rail and into the tunnel beyond. He looked back to his three companions.

"Then let's get moving."

On their walk down the dimly lit tunnel, the two soldiers introduced themselves Parker (Bandana) and Jetson (Gasmask). While Shephard tried to occupy himself with looking for Black Ops or aliens, he couldn't help but overhear their discussions with Robbins about their platoons and experiences in the Black Mesa Facility. It sounded like this place was going to become one of those battlefields of legend that people would talk about for decades to come. Until the next disaster struck and the media drew the attention to that particular disaster.

That was assuming the Black Ops didn't succeed in covering the whole thing up. Shephard could see that shit in the suit smiling smugly as he addressed all the reporters, telling them about some dire mechanical failure that resulted in the destruction of the facility. But what about rumours of alien creatures? Just that, ladies and

gentlemen of the press; a rumour. Just like all the soldiers who had been sent to their pointless deaths there.

All of them, reduced to gossip and hearsay.

Shephard shook his head as they came to another crossing, this one going off into a corridor that bent off to the left. The sickly yellow of the walls didn't do much to disguise the blood stains across the surface, nor the dead security guard that lay beneath them.

"Squad, quiet down," Parker said, readjusting what he had told them was his 'lucky bandana'. Whatever the hell that meant. Shephard believed that either you were good at your job, or you weren't. No lucky charm would save your life. But right now, he was wishing he had something to believe in, even if it was just a dirty piece of cloth.

Shephard turned back to Robbins. "You stay here."

"But-"

"He's right, doc," Parker confirmed, his shotgun aimed firmly at the corridor beyond. "You're valuable right now."

"Oh, thanks. That means I'm even *more* likely to die."

All of them shared a smile at that. But the moment was quickly interrupted by the light tapping of feet on the concrete of the corridor ahead of them. All four soldiers took aim, Jetson pushing Robbins behind him. To his credit, the medic didn't complain.

The tapping grew louder.

Louder still.

A thin, lithe black figure hopped out from around the corner, the high pitched pop of the silenced weapon sounding only a few times before the figure jumped back under cover again.

The bullets were aimed at Jetson, all of them smashing through his gasmask with little difficulty. His body limply fell back onto Robbins behind him, who quickly managed to move around the lower the soldier to the ground slowly. Parker glanced back at his dead friend only once before his gaze, full of bloodlust, returned to the corridor.

"Oh, that's it, you sons of bitches…"

The tapping came to their ears again, and Parker launched himself forward. Shephard managed to grab onto his vest and tug him back again, prompting a vicious glare from the bearded soldier. He put up a finger in front of Parker's face, telling him to wait.

Shephard knelt and tilted his rifle at a slightly upwards angle. Then he waited.

The tapping grew closer again, as it had before.

This time, there were two sets of footsteps. And, as expected, two of the lithe figure danced out, small guns at the ready. Shephard pulled the secondary trigger on the M4, sending he grenade spiralling through the air. The pair of Black Ops had only a few seconds to register the explosive and try to move before it hit the ground between them. The white flash of the explosion blasted them to bloody pieces.

Once they had opened their eyes, Parker gave Shephard a congratulatory pat on the shoulder before leading the way. Shephard looked back to Robbins, who was knelt beside Jetson, head bowed in silent prayer. Slowly, he got to his feet.

"I sure as hell hope he's going somewhere better than this."

Shephard could only nod, once for agreement, then again to indicate that they should follow their bandana wearing comrade. Robbins went on ahead, and Shephard gave Jetson a silent apology before moving on.

Before he had even managed to get inside the corridor, Parker had already opened fire on and killed another Black Ops soldier. But his left leg was bleeding badly. Robbins knelt beside him to take a look, but Parker fiercely waved him off.

"No time for that, doc," he gasped before limping on ahead of them.

Robbins gave Shephard a pleading look, but all the Corporal could manage was a shrug. Once a soldier had made his mind up, it was difficult to change it, and that was in the most ordinary of circumstances. In a situation like this, where their very survival was in question, well… there was just no way Shephard could do anything.

His medic comrade didn't seem to see it this way, but Shephard wasn't about to be challenged on the matter, so he moved on, leaving Robbins behind him.

"Looks like that was the last of them," Parker ascertained from around the bend. "But look what I found!"

As Shephard and Robbins rounded the corner, they came to another section of the rail, this one complete with transit car. Although he wasn't sure how to operate it, Shephard figured he could figure it out without too much difficulty. They all piled on, Parker adopting a painful looking kneeling position overlooking the side, while Robbins could only stand there, staring down at the bleeding wound in his comrade's thigh.

A throttle stick protruded from the centre of the control panel on the car, so Shephard gripped that and pushed it forward. The car jerked to life with a loud mechanical grunt. Robbins had to grab on to one of the guardrails running along the side to stop from falling off.

And so they travelled forward in silence, the car taking them automatically around several turns and ramps before they passed by some viewing ports on the right. Looking in, Shephard recognised the rocky area; it was the place Gruber had died earlier. He crushed

his eyes shut, hoping that none of the others would notice the bleeding torso lying in the miniature canyon.

At least a few minutes after that (although to Shephard it felt like seconds), they came to a stop, this one seemingly mandatory due to the red containment door that was down in front of them. On the platform beside them a sandbag wall had been erected, and Shephard knelt beside Parker to inspect it further as the car slowed to an automatic halt.

Suddenly, a black-clad form darted up from behind the sandbag and opened fire. The bullets sparked brilliantly against the metal of the car, the flashes dazzling Shephard. Parker leapt to his feet with speed Shephard wouldn't have thought possible for an injured man, charging at the Black Ops. Shephard extended a futile hand.

"Parker, don't-"

His enemy continued to unload his M4 into the soldier, but is seemed to do nothing to Parker except make him angrier. Blood flew out of Parker with every bullet.

The Black Ops ran out of ammunition as Parker dived onto him. Shephard ran over as he saw Parker shove the shotgun nozzle into the Black Ops face and fire. Dark crimson sprayed across the floor, glistening under the lights above him. But Shephard wasn't really paying attention to that.

Dropping his rifle, he cradled Parker's dying head in his hand.

"Oh shit, no, no… MEDIC!" Shephard looked up. Robbins was nowhere to be seen.

All Parker could manage was a gut-wrenchingly reassuring smile before his eyes rolled up into his head. Shephard just knelt there, staring at the dead body in his arms for what felt like days before he slowly lay the head down. He ran his hands over Parker's eyelids,

closing them as gently as he could. Blood from Shephard's glove smeared of the dead soldier's face.

His eyes stung with tears. But the sadness quickly gave way to rage, his fists clenching and his jaw crushing his teeth into one another. He launched to his feet and ran back to the car, looking for Robbins.

"WHERE THE FUCK WERE YOU? PARKER-"

The words died in his throat right there as he saw the medic lying on the electrified rails, the single bullet hole in his head telling Shephard all he needed to know. Robbins' body twitched spasmodically as the electrical current ran through him. Shephard, standing on the rail car, managed to retrieve the body and lay it beside Parker's.

Shephard stood beside them for longer than he knew he had. But he didn't care. The whole place could have blown to fuck and he wouldn't have cared.

And this was because of his own people. Not some ruthless dictator or merciless alien. American soldiers, from the American army, sent here by some fucking American bureaucrat in a crisp suit.

The tears flowed behind his gasmask, and he removed it to allow them freedom. Why go on? His bleary gaze fell on the bodies before him.

Because if he didn't, they would have died for nothing. And then, Shephard knew what he was going to do. He was going to get out of here. He was going to get out of here and tell the world what the government was doing in this Godforsaken place. And then he would find that Suit and rip his fucking head from his shoulders.

Jaw set, he put his gasmask back on, picked up his rifle, and looked around the room for an exit. A door at the far end lay loosely open in front of him, and Shephard went inside. It was an incredibly small office, but the ceiling had collapsed in. The dead bodies of some of those head-sucking things revealed why. Grabbing a nearby chair,

Shephard used it to clamber up into the area above the ceiling. The light material of the tiles barely held his weight, but there was enough for him to move around *very* carefully.

A grate in the far corner attracted his attention, and Shephard made his way over towards it. With a single blow from the butt of his rifle, Shephard dislodged it and crawled inside. It went in a long, straight line ahead of him, light spilling out from whatever corridor was at the far end.

As he approached the exit of the vent, the sound of very heavy machinery at work gradually came to his ears. But it was unlike anything he had ever heard before. It was like a loud whirring, but nowhere near industrial sounding enough to be a fan or turbine. And then Shephard remembered where he was, and what kind of advanced technology they were likely to have there. He resumed crawling, heading for his new goal.

The Lambda Complex.

(A/N: And so, Shephard gets to show off some of his Bourne-style moves. Having just recently obtained the trilogy on DVD, those movies have a become somewhat of a major influence on me for action scenes. Which I don't think is a particularly bad thing.

Although you might disagree. Review and let me know!

Next Chapter: Lambda Core)

Lambda Core

-1Disclaimer: I don't own *Half-Life.*

(A/N: Many thankful thanks to hhgbh for beta-ing!)

The Black Mesa Incident

Chapter Twenty Six: Lambda Core

The doors loudly separated, finally locking in place with a loud clang. A Black Mesa van sat on a freight elevator in front of him. A control booth beside it drew Gordon's attention, and he walked over to it, only then fully feeling the limp in his left leg. The ache in his neck was pretty vicious, too, but it was nowhere near as distracting.

A lone handle beside an emergency stop button was all that adorned the control panel in the yellow booth. Gordon pulled it down and lightly jogged out and onto the elevator. It started up surprisingly quietly, although the consistent drone of the gears as it descended diagonally quickly diluted the light relief. Yellow lights travelled over his head now and again, casting an amber spotlight across him at regular intervals.

The elevator brought him down into a room full of towering crates, some big by design and others stacked upon each haphazardly. Gordon could make out some moving shapes around the maze of boxes, and quickly recognised them as the crab creatures. He slipped the crowbar from his thigh and held it at the ready.

As soon as the platform reached its' home, one of the crabs leapt at him. Gordon slashed it out of midair with the pointed end of the crowbar, tearing into it and tossing it limply across the room. He walked on, keeping an eye on the three or so of the creatures cautiously making their way towards him. Gordon ducked a flying leap at his head from the left, and followed the crabs' trajectory until

it landed on the floor. He stabbed the straight end of the crowbar through it. Another leapt at him, and he swung the crowbar without dislodging the dead crab.

The corpse flew across the room as Gordon hit the crab diagonally down, slamming it into the floor.

And then there was one.

It seemed to contemplate turning around, but it was all a complicated, scheming ploy to make him let his guard down. The creature went for his head, and Gordon ducked and swung the crowbar straight down in a whooshing arc. The crowbar impaled the creature to the floor beside its' brethren, a quiet gargle all that escaped its' mouth… belly… thing.

His glasses began tickling his nose, so he removed them to give it a good scratch with the back of his gloved hand. While he scratched, he had a look around the now-blurry landscape. He could make out the red shape of a ladder leading up to a platform ahead of him. A green blob which he took to be a crate sat up there as well. But he couldn't see a door…

His nose now relieved, Gordon put the glasses back on. Ah. There was the door. Slipping the crowbar back into its' home, Gordon sidled his way through the crates and up the ladder. He stopped as he reached the empty green crate. It looked ominously military like.

Gordon groaned and closed his eyes. *More* soldiers? He only had a crowbar, for God's sake. What the hell did they think he could do. But then again, he noted with only the barest hint of smugness, he *had* just blown up a tank. He puffed air out from between his lips like a horse and shook himself down before walking to the automatic door. It slid open with only the barest of whispers.

All he could hear in the cramped corridor beyond was a steady humming. It was actually quite comforting; it reminded him of the Anomalous Materials lab, monitoring the readings of the anti-mass

spectrometer with Dr Kleiner while Dr Magnusson stood over them, tutting disapprovingly every five minutes. Magnusson had treated them badly enough normally, but after the incident with the casserole…

Actually, Gordon hated the humming, and he wanted it to go away.

A dead scientist greeted him after the second or so turning, and Gordon had to back up to avoid stepping on his head. The blonde hair was soaked with blood, of which there was *a lot.* And recent, Gordon couldn't help noticing. The automatic door in front of him obviously didn't bode well, then.

He looked down to the stunned looking scientist. "Sorry."

With that, Gordon stepped over the body and to the door, which slid open startlingly fast. The humming was louder in this room, although he couldn't tell why. No machinery, just container after container after container. Gordon hadn't seen many of these around the facility before today. But now it seemed that every corner he turned there were these huge shipping containers everywhere. Always in the distance, too. Until now, of course. Now they were stacked up on top of one another to make this huge, imposing towers of rusted red and blue. Handily, they also prohibited most of the light from above from getting to him.

Although he could make out the barrels with the big triangular yellow symbol of fire on them. He made a mental note of how they would kill him and started off to the right, since that was all the containers in front of him would allow him to do. There was only the tightest of gaps between the container and the wall on the left, and Gordon figured the military would probably like nothing more than to find him wedged between a container and a wall.

A familiar tapping noise came to his ears, echoing around the warehouse.

Gordon's eyelids hovered halfway shut. Oh. It was *them* again.

On cue, a lithe form popped out in front of him. He dashed back and squeezed himself between the wall and the container as she fired, the bullets popping little clouds of dust out of the wall. As before, the soldier lady darted out of harms way, just in case Gordon was carrying something other than a tool designed for opening boxes. Gordon blew out a breath, and then immediately hissed it back in again when he noticed the crab creature down beside him. He shimmied out of the gap as fast as he could manage, only just reaching safety when the thing leapt at him.

Gordon reached out and grabbed one of the front claws with his hand, and it wriggled helplessly in his grasp. He was about to slice his crowbar through it when he heard the tapping again. With a cocked eyebrow, he looked down to the crab creature writhing irritably in front of him. Still holding the creature, Gordon backed up to the container, hiding himself just on the corner.

The tapping became louder. Louder… louder…

The woman leapt out again, obviously expecting him to be further away, and *certainly* not expecting him to be wedging a crab alien down on her head. It clamped down eagerly on her head, and Gordon winced as she stumbled around, trying desperately to pry the thing off. He rushed forward and slammed the blunt end of the crowbar down on the back of her barely exposed head. She collapsed to the ground limply, and Gordon crouched down beside her. As precisely as he could manage, Gordon swung the crowbar and tore the creature off her. It rebounded off the container before it landed on the floor with a dull thump, dead.

Gordon inspected her face. The material of her balaclava had been ripped to shreds almost instantly, and her goggles broken. Amazing, really, what those things could to in a few seconds. Not *good*, but amazing.

More tapping brought Gordon's attention back to the maze of containers in front of him. He checked that the woman on the floor was still breathing before standing up, crowbar down by his side.

There was a 'corridor' going straight down in front of him through the containers, with gaps on either side every now and again to allow for other 'corridors'. At the far end, Gordon could see two groups of the explosive barrels planted opposite each other.

A black figure popped out of one of the corridors on the right, and Gordon darted back around the container for cover. Interestingly, he didn't hear the distinctive pop of her silenced weapon; all he heard was a light clanking noise. He poked his head around the corner and saw a grenade happily hopping along the floor like a flat stone on water. Flicking his head up and down to check where the woman had popped out, Gordon ran around the corner and hit the grenade croquet style, sending it scuttling along the ground down the 'corridor'.

As a small gift from God, the soldier lady took that moment to jump out of her hiding spot and aim her weapon at him. She only had enough time to look down at the grenade sliding into place in front of her before it exploded, setting off the explosive barrels behind her. Gordon lifted a hand to protect his eyes from the light, the heat feeling oddly pleasant on his face.

He waited until all he could hear was the faint crackling of fire, then lowered his arm and continued on, exploring the entire room. After checking behind every container, he came across a rather tall corridor completely blocked by crates. His crowbar was lifted at the ready before he had even reached them. Within a few satisfying - if exhausting - minutes, Gordon had smashed his way through the crates and was walking up some metal stairs, his shuffling boots echoing loudly.

It took him up to a walkway that ran all around the warehouse, overlooking the containers below. There was a corridor behind the wall running parallel to the walkways. Since he had had enough of falling from great heights for one day, Gordon slipped into the corridor and started walking. After a few turns a small platform elevator, barely big enough for three people, welcomed him down to the floor below.

It only let off a hiss as it descended, the hydraulics well maintained. As soon as it touched down, Gordon heard a rather throaty alien growl. Instantly, his crowbar was up and ready, held like a sword in front of him. He ran through the small corridor and into the huge arching tunnel that ran from right to left in front of it. The right blast door looked melted and warped, so Gordon opted for the one on the left. Besides, there were explosive barrels stacked up all around the right-hand door.

And Gordon didn't like being near exploding things. They tended to explode.

He reached the huge metal doors, the yellow safety lines down the middle scarred with use. Gordon glanced around for some way to open it when they flung themselves open, sliding off to the sides. One of the armoured creatures stood towering above him, and brought back a meaty hand to slam down on him. For a moment, Gordon almost back-pedalled out of the way, but instead swung the curved edge of the crowbar into the creature's muscular belly. It landed with a squelchy thunk, prompting the creature to grunt roughly.

It just seemed to make it angrier, and it lifted both arms to crush him. Gordon whirled the crowbar around in his hands and drove it up through the creatures mouth and out the back of its' head. Yellow blood spilt out in a rather large splat, coating the crowbar and the front of the HEV suit. Only a low gurgle emerged from the creature as it slumped to its' knees.

Just as Gordon let out a breath, the now familiar noise of a teleportation event exploded into being behind him. He turned to see another armoured alien, this one stood at the far end of the tunnel. Near the explosive barrels.

Gordon smiled his disturbing smile. The smile that indicated that he was enjoying this on some primitive, animalistic level. He grabbed the arm of the fallen alien, clutching onto the insect firing claw. Reaching underneath, he felt for the familiar trigger 'gland', aimed,

and squeezed. Five squeaking darts fired out and hit the pile of barrels to the creatures' right. The blast blew it across and into the other wall, where it hit some more barrels and caused them to explode too.

By the time Gordon could open his eyes again, there was very little left of the creature except for its' sizzling armour.

Another teleportation noise sounded behind him, followed by the same alien growl. He turned, dragging the alien corpse with him like a scarf made of animal fur. Crates stood on either side of a ramp in front of Gordon that lead down to a dark archway. The wall the archway was built into held a small platform on the right-hand side, a window and door barely allowing a view into the room beyond. The alien seemed confused at first, but quickly recognised Gordon as an enemy and fired. Gordon just stepped back around and used the alien body for cover before whirling around and unleashing a torrent of buzzing darts himself.

It continued like this for a few volleys before the creature, exhausted, bleeding and breathing heavily, just collapsed backwards and died.

Without looking up, Gordon reached for the crowbar and yanked it out of the alien's mouth above him. He walked on, trying not to think about how cool that move had looked. Somehow, it felt wrong to do cool things without Barney around.

Gordon stopped walking. It had been some time since he had thought about anyone back at Anomalous Materials. His work family. Kleiner, Eli, Barney, Breen, Magnusson… he was missing them all. Well, perhaps not Breen. He always had seemed too smarmy for Gordon's tastes. Not that he said such things out loud. Normally he would just avoid talking to him.

But the others… it occurred to Gordon for the first time that he might not see any of them again. He might never again race Barney to Dr Kleiner's lab when he locked himself out of the office. Or take silent enjoyment in the fact that he was the only scientist in the facility to

be invited to the security guard poker night. Or sit around listening to Eli describing in microscopic detail the cutest thing Alyx had done that day. And yes, even Magnusson shouting obscenities at him through the speakers of the test chamber so loud that his ears rang for two days.

Life as Gordon Freeman knew it was over. There was no going back. And this was only just occurring to him now.

A beeping from up above him made him blink into a frown before casting his gaze in that direction. A small walkway coming out of the wall held a view through a window of a white, sterile room. Gordon walked to the walkway on the right hand side of the room and climbed the ladder. The beeping noise had been someone punching in the access code for the door from the other side.

Gordon stepped through, and almost struck the scientist standing next to the doorway when he cleared his throat. The dark skinned scientist ducked slightly, hands up.

"I apologise, Mr Freeman…" he said, sounding extremely tired. The lines on his face didn't seem to add up to a lot of rest and relaxation. When Gordon relaxed the crowbar, the scientist continued.

"… But I couldn't open that door until I was sure you had scoured the area. This is the last entrance to the Lambda Complex," he said, punching another code into the control panel beside the door. It slid shut compliantly. "Every other has been sealed off to contain the invasion. When we realised you *might actually* make it here-" the stunned way he said this made Gordon scowl a little, "-we drew straws to see who would stay behind to let you through. Obviously, *I* drew the short one." As if to accentuate the point, he reached into his pocket and produced a short straw, holding it entirely too close to Gordon's face.

Gordon leaned back slightly, his cockeyed gaze firmly set on the straw as it poked towards his glasses. Finally, the scientist put it back into his lab coat.

"My colleagues are waiting at the tip of the Lambda reactor," he said, pointing down the room behind him. It went off to the left, where Gordon assumed there was a door. "Waiting for *you*, I mean."

"Me?"

The scientist nodded, balding head shining in the harsh white light. "The reactor is shut down right now, but you can activate it on your way up. You'll have to flood the core anyway to get into the teleportation labs."

If Gordon's eyebrow had been cocked before, now it was going through the roof. The word 'teleportation' was on the tip of his tongue when the scientist spoke again, rather quietly.

"You're not authorised to know about those…" It sounded like he begrudged Gordon knowing such information. "But," he sighed, looking Gordon up and down, "I can see you already know far more than any *one* manis supposed to."

That was true enough. Even now, he was still discovering new things. Like his ordinary life being well and truly over whether he survived this thing or not.

"I'll… activate the retinal scanner and let you through."

Gordon straightened his glasses and followed around the corner. He waited patiently as the scientist stooped forward and put his eyes to the lens, occupying himself with an impromptu inspection of his blood soaked crowbar. Red and yellow had sort of congealed to make an orangey splatter pattern on certain parts. Mostly the ends.

The scanner bleeped happily and the door opened. Gordon nodded to the scientist.

"Thank you. Are you sure you don't-"

The scientist waved a hand. "I'm irrelevant now. All our hopes are on you, Mr Freeman."

Now that sounded like a recipe for the end of the world.

"Oh! And once you reach the teleportation labs, you'll need to remember this sequence of numbers: two, four, and seven. I would explain why, but enough time has been wasted. It will be clear when you reach the lab."

Gordon was tempted to ask, but instead of saying anything, Gordon just cocked an eyebrow and continued onwards to the corridor that ran off to the right. To be honest, he was happy enough without any companions. He knew that once this was over every person he had met and lost in the past few days would haunt him in the most terrifying ways, so the less people who tried to help him the better.

At the far end of the corridor he could see some elevator doors, but before that was another door. Finding it far too tempting to ignore, and feeling somewhat safer here, he went to it. It slid open and allowed him inside.

Somehow he spotted the scientist in the corner of the room straight away, avoiding any false alarm mishaps. He was tapping away absently on a control panel, although what kind of work he could still be doing after all this, Gordon had no idea. Two small closed off archways in the wall made Gordon curious, but the large signs saying 'WEAPONS TEST AREA' quickly cleared that up. This was a firing range. Two platform stood, one for each archway. On the one closest to the scientist, there was backpack-sized device with a hose coming out of it. All kinds of advanced looking attachments and devices clung to the back. The scientist sighed and wiped a hand over his slicked back hair.

"Were you in weapons research too?" he asked, concentrating on the lambda symbol on Gordon's suit. "I built the Gluon Gun," he said, gesturing to the device, "but I *just can't* bring myself to use it on a living creature." With a look that seemed a mix of disdain and

admiration, he spoke again to Gordon. "You don't look like you have any problem killing things." He gestured for Gordon to take it.

While he wanted to make some kind of protest, the fact was that Gordon didn't have much of a problem killing things at the moment. And while another scientist would have liked nothing more than to debate the morality of the amount of death he had caused over the past two days, Gordon didn't have the patience for it. They needed him in the Lambda Core, so that was where he was going to go. And it looked like the Gluon Gun could help him. So, without any kind of acknowledgement of the scientists' distaste, he strapped himself into it.

He felt like a Ghostbuster.

The hose ended in an angular funnel, through which Gordon assumed laser-like hellfire would erupt when he needed it. A thick handle protruding from the side of the funnel held a red button at the base. So simple, yet Gordon was almost afraid to touch it, so instead he just tucked the hose into the allotted bracket on the backpack.

With a small nod of gratitude to the slightly appalled scientist, Gordon stepped out and went into the elevator. It took him down the turquoise shaft without complaint, stopping at some glass doors below. They too slid open silently, almost in awe of him somehow. Gordon stepped outside. The floor on which he stood overlooked a pool of water below, two walkways crossing vertically over it. He could see that the path he stood on offered him two ways down; an entrance on the left-hand side of the room, and one on the right.

As he walked to the open corridor on the left hand side, Gordon noticed a gurgling noise from a corridor just beside him. He slowly unhooked the Gluon Gun and whirled around the corner. Two electricity aliens stood over a dead scientist, conversing in a fluxing voice over the body like it was a water cooler. Gordon pushed the red button. The backpack made a noise like five vacuum cleaners working at the same time, and the hose ejected a spiralling shaft of

blue light towards his enemies. One touch from the blast turned the right-hand one to a yellow cloud, evaporating it on the spot.

Its' companion looked from the cloudy remains, then back to Gordon.

Gordon smiled. "Oh, look. A new toy."

When all that remained of them was slowly falling yellow dew, Gordon looked down to the now calming Gluon Gun. His throat suddenly felt dry. This weapon was truly terrifying. *Good*, but terrifying.

The corridor in front of him branched off to the left and the right, the former signposted as 'AUX.TANK REACTOR ACCESS' and the latter 'MAINTANENCE STATION'. Maintenance sounded pretty good to him right now, so Gordon went in that direction, Gluon Gun once again safely tucked away on his back. Two staircases went down below him, and Gordon had to swing his leg around a little to avoid the bruised pain in his thigh. Below was a small room, a scientist and a security guard inside.

They both turned upon hearing the door of the room slide open. The security guard seemed fairly neutral, only offering a slight nod to Gordon. On his right, however, the scientist almost instantly looked down his nose at him, as though instantly assured that he was well above Gordon. But his attention wasn't really on the people. On the wall, a HEV and first aid charging station awaited him.

"Freeman, isn't it?" The scientist shrilled as Gordon passed him. Without a word, Gordon unhooked the cable from the HEV station and plugged it into the necessary socket on his side. With an affirmative beep, the suit started charging, the humming almost drowning out the scientist behind him.

"You'll need to activate both pumps to flood the reactor, and then that access pipe down there will take you to the core!" He pointed out of an observation window into a room beyond. Gordon only quickly glanced out before returning to the HEV station.

"Time is short!" the scientist insisted, running his hands through his unconvincing comb over exasperatedly.

"Mm-hm," Gordon nodded, going onto the first aid station once the HEV had been exhausted. He watched with no small measure of satisfaction as his Heads Up Display flickered back to life, informing him of his ever improving health. He felt it, as well. Energy he hadn't felt in some time made his fingers tingle and his hair stand on end. The first aid station darkened, make a negative electronic growl when he attempted to use it further.

He turned back to the scientist and security guard. "Flood the reactor, you said?"

A loud groan escaped the scientist, who flung his arms up into the air. The security guard beside him smiled. Obviously he had seen this kind of thing before.

"There, there!" the scientist enthused, pointing a trembling finger out of the observation port. Gordon walked to it and looked out. It was a swimming pool, or at least very close to one. He followed the troublingly thin finger to a small, thin tunnel in the wall at the bottom of the pool. Above it, in fairly plain letters, the words 'CORE ACCESS' gave him a pretty good idea of where to go.

Nodding, he stood up to his full height, looking down on the scientist, who he only just now realised was rather short.

"Activate the pumps, you said?"

Another loud groan from the scientist accompanied some pulling of what little hair he had left, also giving Gordon the knowledge of why he had so little hair in the first place. He headed out of the room, but paused when the security guard asked if he needed any help. In truth, he probably did. But if he was going to be sure of one thing, it was that no-one else was going to die before his eyes. So with a polite shake of the head, Gordon went back up the stairs and to one of the walkways he had observed earlier.

The two platforms that overlooked the pool of water below led off to different corridors, one orange and the other blue. Since the orange of his HEV suit had served him well, he went with that first. A collapsed corridor stood in his way, but he managed to wriggle through with little difficulty. Well, quite a bit of difficulty actually, thank to the Gluon Gun.

Beyond the awkward debris, Gordon found himself at a door that he assumed would lead him to one of the pumps he needed to activate. The door slid open, and Gordon stepped through.

And immediately ducked back inside again. Three of the bear-sized, armoured aliens awaited him inside, gathered around the pool of water in the middle of the expansive room. The door slid shut, intercepting their buzzing darts before they reached him. Gordon reached back for the Gluon hose and readied himself.

"One… two… three."

He took a step to the door and watched it slide up agonisingly slowly. One of the aliens had taken to standing just in front of the door, and Gordon let out the tiniest of yelps as he back-pedalled, firing the Gluon Gun as he went. Within a few seconds, the alien was gone in a puff of yellow moisture. The other two, no less deterred by this incredibly new weapon they faced, took aim. Two more pushes of the red button, and they were gone too.

Gordon smiled. This gun, he liked.

A ladder on the other side of the room led up to a walkway high above his head that, in turn, led to a door. Although the Gluon Gun didn't exactly make for ideal climbing conditions, it still didn't take Gordon long to make his way up. Only from the walkway did he notice the red and silver structures in the deep pool of water below, most likely connected to the generator in the room beyond in some fashion. For a change, only a few of the small alien crab things awaited him in the control room. He thought for a moment that he

might conserve the Gluon Gun. With a shrug, he blasted them to nothing.

The sizeable generator had a simple red, pull down lever in the middle of the control panel, which Gordon slammed down with relish. It thrummed to life, lights flashing and fading in and out of view.

It only took him a few minutes to get back to the walkways leading to the two corridors, and even less time to reach the door of the blue passageway. Once again, he came across a rather intimidating amount of armoured aliens. That is, intimidating if it wasn't for the fully charged HEV suit and Gluon Gun. The room mirrored the first, and Gordon had no trouble activating that pump and making his way back to the maintenance room where the security guard and scientist awaited him.

The scientist's face was red to the point of a meltdown. "Don't linger, Mr Freeman! You've turned on the pumps! Now take the access pipe, flood the core, and get on up to the labs, without delay!"

"I was just… checking if it was working."

"Well, that's very good! Waste more time explaining your motives to me!"

The vicious manner of his words actually made Gordon stumble a bit as he made his way out. As he went up the stairs, he noticed that the security guard was following him.

"Um… I really don't think you should come."

"Oh, I'm not. I know what that thing is, and I know I'd just be gettin' in the way. I was jus' gonna say that I wouldn't go swimming with that thing if I were you." He summoned Gordon closer conspiratorially. "I heard that some guy *sweated* too much while he was wearing it, and it blew up."

Gordon's heart sank. "So water-"

"And Gluon Gun's don't mix." He paused. "Sorry."

All the bespectacled scientist could manage was a resigned sigh. "I'll leave it by the pool."

The security guard nodded. "Okay. And good luck."

Gordon just nodded and moped all the way back up the stairs and to the Auxiliary Reactor. He heard alien growls coming from inside and felt a pang of sadness. Never again would it be this easy to get past some giant, bloodthirsty aliens. He would miss the ease.

He waited for the door to slide open halfway before ducking underneath and unleashing blue, twisting fury on the creatures. Once he was sure that there were no aliens waiting in hiding to pop out and pull his head off, Gordon carefully removed the Gluon Gun and left it beside the door. He walked to the water, the white tiles and light blue reminding him of the Black Mesa swimming pools at the gym.

It also reminded him of the time that Barney had tossed, of all things, a watermelon on his head while he was doing laps. Apparently it was the special in the canteen that day. Barney had found it hilarious. Gordon had not.

One hand on his glasses, Gordon jumped in. He took a moment to get his bearings and adjust the water on his eyes before he swam straight down. On the way, he passed by the observation window with the scientist and security guard inside. He offered a little wave on his way down, but that just seemed to annoy the scientist further, who vehemently stabbed a finger to the access pipe.

So Gordon swam. The light started to fade around him, and all he could see was a faint yellow and green tint coming from up ahead. Eventually, just as his body started to tell him that he needed to breathe in order to live, Gordon reached the room beyond and surfaced. The room was a large cylinder. The centrepiece of the room was a thick metal yellow tower, extending up to the top of the

room. Power literally thrummed from the core and through the water, making Gordon vibrate slightly. Walkways ran around the circumference of the room, making three levels overall. But the nearest ladder was far too high for him to reach.

Gordon took a breath and submerged again. On the walls on either side of the core at the very bottom of the pool, Gordon could see two pipes with cranks beside them. The words 'COOLANT ACCESS' above them pretty much determined his next course of action. Going first to one, then the other, Gordon turned the crank and watched as water rushed out of the pipes in a jet stream, quickly raising the level of the water. Gordon sprang out of the water and paddled to the ladder, which was now within reach.

Sparks flew up ahead, the sound of stray electricity and the smell of burning metal doing nothing to calm his nerves. He looked up. Bolts of yellow and green electricity sprang out of the core at various levels, gradually rotating around like the blades on a fan. With a resigned intake of breath, Gordon heaved himself up onto the walkway above. It took some timing (and a lot of painful shocks to his ankles), but Gordon got the hang of hopping over the bolts as they slowly travelled his way.

He made his way up to the top walkway where a door to the corridor beyond awaited him. A steady stream of yellow lightning drilled into the door, which remained almost unmarked from the onslaught. Every few minutes, the bolt would stop for just a handful of seconds before reactivating. Standing just beside the door, Gordon waited patiently for the bolt to subside, all the while having to jump over another bolt of electricity as it rounded the core. The yellow bolt faded, and Gordon ran to the door, which opened as leisurely as it pleased. He eventually had to crouch and scramble underneath. Once fully it open, the door gradually realised that its' user had already gone through, and slowly started to close. He breathlessly waited for the door to close while he lay against the wall.

Eventually, it *did* close, and Gordon heaved himself to his feet.

The corridor turned a sharp left corner into another, where some open elevator doors welcomed him inside. The elevator itself, however, was well and truly broken, judging by the fact that the control panel was sparking and buzzing. The metallic groans coming from above didn't exactly inspire faith in the thing, either. And so, Gordon climbed up on top of the elevator and latched on the nearby emergency ladder, taking it up to the top floor, where he hoped the teleportation labs would be.

After making the difficult jump from one end of the shaft and through the open doors (it involved an awkward manner of pushing off from the wall with his legs while turning in mid air before grasping onto the ledge on the other side - or, in simple terms, difficult), Gordon walked onward down the corridor and found himself stood next to a window. Inside, he could see a small control booth, the body of security guard nestled in the corner with blood streaked up and down the walls.

He didn't really want to think about it, so he continued on. The corridor went off to both the left and right, although the former simply seemed to end with a strange little gap in the corner of the wall, barely big enough for one person to stand in. On the right, the corridor stretched on for quite a distance, doors on either side seeming to hold more promise. But, curiosity got the better of him, and Gordon walked to the left. He managed to shimmy his way into the 'alleyway', crowbar nudging irritably against his leg.

What he saw inside pulled the breath from his lungs. A green room, lit from underneath by a latticework walkway below. A platform on the far side of the room, level with the window that Gordon now looked through. Inside stood the man in the suit, briefcase by his side, lit from behind by a glowing orb of green energy. Gordon couldn't move within the tight confines of the 'alley', and could only stare as the man straightened his tie, turned, and walked into the orb. And in a flash of light, he was gone.

Gordon just stood and stared, waiting unblinkingly for something else to happen. For the man to reappear, for the orb to explode or fade, or *something.* But that was all. Just a fleeting glimpse of the man

responsible for all this. Gordon didn't know that for sure, of course, but… somehow, he *knew* . That man had started all of this. And once this was over, Gordon was going to find him and get, at the very least, an explanation.

A automated announcement over the speaker brought him back out of his internal musings, the words stilted and slow like an answering machine.

" *Warning. Unauthorised organic force detected in teleportation lab."*

He shimmied out of the alley and into the corridor. After a long breath through his nose and out through his mouth, Gordon pulled out his crowbar and walked down the corridor. The doors were all locked, only letting out an intrusive negative noise whenever he approached them. A huge metal pipe ran along the ceiling of the corridor, an occasional curved protrusion jutting out, crank attached. A similar crank stood in the wall on the left, and Gordon stopped to run a hand over it. That incident with the man in the suit had affected him. Hell, it wasn't even an incident. It was just a frustrating, fleeting glimpse of something he *knew* was important. All of this just seemed to so petty compared to that small taste.

A low growl from around the corner at the end of the corridor attracted his attention, and Gordon approached it with crowbar at cautiously raised. When he rounded the corner, he came face to face with three armoured aliens, all of them stood in a row in the cramped corridor before him.

He turned and ran, hearing their large footsteps thundering away behind him. His feet skidded as he tried to stop at the crank, and he managed to turn with one mighty thrust. Steam burst from the pipes above the aliens' head, and Gordon could only squint as the mist hit his eyes and fogged his glasses. He took the loud thumping of the aliens falling to the ground as an 'all clear' signal, and turned he crank back. The intrusive hissing of the steam ceased, and Gordon cautiously headed out into the cloud.

After tripping over a scorched alien corpses, Gordon eventually cleared the team and walked down the now clear corridor. Another locked door on his left read 'LAB', but one further on and on the right, reading 'CORE', seemed to hold promise. It slid open compliantly and revealed, finally, the teleportation labs that Gordon had been more than mildly curious to see.

The room in front of him contained two of the same orbs that Gordon had seen the man in the suit entered earlier. Was that how he managed to disappear so easily? He had access to these things? Gordon tucked the question away along with his crowbar and returned his attention to the orbs. They floated in place on slightly raised platforms, pulsing with energy. Gordon desperately wanted to touch them, to go through and feel what it was like. He suspected he had already been through the process back during the resonance cascade, but still… the scientist in him wanted so badly to experience this with a keen, neutral eye. Teleportation was what he had joined MIT for. It was why he got his PhD, and why he unrelentingly pursued a placement in Black Mesa. Ever since he had seen the first experiments during his time at Innsbruck University.

And now, here he was. Within arms' reach of his scientific dream. He shook his head and looked to the larger room beyond the one in which he stood. A yellow metallic tower stood in the cylindrical chamber, towering above him. At three levels, one in front of him, one just above and another above that, the tower was hollowed out. Three entrances to the hollowed out area were visible to him, each of the numbered. Three sets of platforms rotated around the core, allowing access to the portals contained within. Floating in place in midair, parallel with each of the three levels, Gordon could see a portal that would allow him to gain access upwards. So. Three levels, nine portals, and some portals that would let him get up.

What was it that scientist had said? Two, four, seven? Yes, that was it. Two, four, seven. Well, Gordon hoped that was it.

The chain link fence in front of him prevented him from simply stepping out onto the rotating platform in front of him, so Gordon

stepped to the portal closest to him. He noted that the portal next to the core for the first level was yellow, as were all of the others above it. So, yellow portals were the exits, green ones the entrances. Gordon watched as the platforms below him rotated around the core, eventually passing beneath the yellow portal.

Gordon stepped into the green orb in front of him. Noiselessly, green flashed around him. Suddenly, he was inside the chamber, standing on the rotating platform as it travelled around the first three entrances to the portals. Gordon smiled deliriously. He had just teleported. Just like that. Still grinning, he looked up and checked where the platform above him was in relation to the next portal he would be coming from. His gaze fell to the numbers of the portals in front of him. Two was quickly coming up.

He checked up again. It seemed like it would work out. Seemed.

He waited until the platform was opposite number two and jumped forward. After another green flash, he was standing a whole floor higher, looking down on the spot he had just occupied. He laughed and shook his head. This was mind-bending.

But he would be damned if it wasn't fun.

Gordon repeated he process he had done before, this time waiting for portal number… four. Yes, that was it, four.

Oh, crap.

The platform reached number four, and the everything above seemed to collate properly. So, he stepped in.

And stepped out with one foot hitting air. Gordon slipped and scrambled for the steadily leaving platform, only just managing to get both arms over the ledge. Gradually, he managed to heave himself back up. He looked over and saw another room, just like the one below, waiting for him, two portals included. Gordon had to admit, this was an ingenious security system, especially since it was

probably improvised. Not something he would have been able to think up, anyway.

He supposed that was why he had been assigned to Anomalous Materials, not here.

Gordon waited for number seven to roll around. Number eight tried to entice him in, and Gordon was sorely tempted to just leap in. But he had things to do, people to meet… Number nine was nowhere near as inviting, the usual pacified green replaced by an angry, pulsing red, sparks flying in every direction. Then came seven, and Gordon jumped through.

Gordon landed in the room he had spied from inside. With the same amazed smile, he turned back to the core, looking to the spot he had just jumped from.

Teleportation. What a concept.

With a look akin to a puppy watching its' master abandon it, Gordon backed out of the room and towards the door. He hoped this technology wasn't abolished when this was all over. Of course, it most definitely would be, but hopefully some radical country that didn't care for United Nation decrees would take it up. Because it was simply amazing.

The door slid open, and Gordon turned around, heading into the darkened corridor beyond. Both ends of the corridor that crossed in front of him had collapsed, the scorch marks indicating it was deliberate. In front of him, a small indentation in the wall allowed just enough room for one person to enter and climb up the ladder inside. Gordon clambered up, hearing the door to the teleporter core close shut as he left it behind.

He climbed up into an equally dark corridor, the wall on the right one only allowing him to go to the left. The corridor ended abruptly at the far end, some metal crates stacked up there. As he walked to them, a horrifically loud metallic groaned echoed through the corridor,

making the whole room shake. Gordon almost lost his footing, but a steadying hand against the wall kept him stable until the shaking subsided. He took a breath and continued on.

Gordon came to a stop at the wall, and looked to his left. Two enormous glass doors awaited him, leading into a room with some crates at the far end, as well as three empty HEV suit compartments. He walked to the door and ended up triggering some security device, because a loud negative beep coincided with him reaching within a few metres of the door. Inside the room, a security guard and a scientist quickly darted around the corner, the former with his weapon at the ready. The security guard ran to a crate just in behind the doors, reaching down and pulling out a shotgun. He lifted it with wobbly arms and aimed it at him just as the security guard behind him lowered his handgun.

The bespectacled, bald scientist behind the glass shook his head and dropped the shotgun with a look of disgust. He walked around the crates and to a control panel in the wall beside the doors. They slid open without complaint, and Gordon entered.

"Gordon Freeman. You've finally found us," the scientist said, his relief evident from the grin hidden by his thick black moustache.

The security guard, a blond man, looked Gordon up and down with an icy blue gaze. "So this is the guy." He holstered his weapon. "We thought you'd never make it."

Gordon didn't say anything, instead waiting for someone else to elaborate. The scientist behind him cleared his throat as he walked around Gordon, heading to the empty HEV compartments.

"This," he said, gesturing to the crates scattered around the compartments, "is the supply depot for our first survey team. Quite a few handsome specimens" - there was a measure of satisfaction in his voice which made the security guard's expression foul considerably - "were collected from the border world and brought back this way…"

Gordon himself was just feeling completely lost at this point. So that meant the crystal samples he had been working with day in and day out since he first arrived with Black Mesa were from an alien world? An alien world these people had been visiting for God knows how long, too. He didn't just feel lost. He felt used.

Any look of achievement the scientist once held faded, replaced instead by an awkward embarrassment. "… um… before the survey members started being collected *themselves*, that is…" He brought his head back up to look straight at Gordon, his tone gaining confidence. "We suspect there is an *immense* portal over there, created by the intense concentration of a single, powerful being. You will know it when you see it." He walked to Gordon slowly, and gently clasped onto his shoulder. "I hate to say this, Gordon, but you must *kill* it, if you can."

"Yeah," the security guard snorted, "you'd *better* kill it."

Although he tried to maintain a neutral expression, Gordon's mind and heart were racing. They expected *him* to do it? But he had already done so much… *seen* so much… he just wanted to rest… God, how he wanted to rest.

The scientist seemed to sense his reluctance, and backed away to give him some room. "Of course, you owe us nothing, Mr Freeman. But you've come this far. You know as much about these creatures as anyone."

His security guard companion nodded, arms folded. "Enough to know that if you don't wipe it out, there won't be much for you to come home to."

The scientist bristled at the comment, visibly discomforted by it. "Yes… so… if you're willing, my colleague is waiting for you at the main portal controls. He will open the gates for you, Mr Freeman. Do hurry."

Gordon's participation practically a given at this point, the security guard nodded to two open doors on the other side of the room. "Don't forget to gear up. And I'll cover you while you're waiting for that portal to warm up."

A cocked eyebrow emerged from behind Gordon's glasses. "Cover me?"

The scientist nodded. "Yes, Gordon. This thing is not only sentient, but intelligent, too. It is likely that it will recognise you as a threat and attempt to stop you crossing over."

Gordon's cockeyed expression gave way to frown as something drifting around in the back of his head suddenly clicked into place. "Wait… what about the rocket? The one I launched last night?"

This prompted an awkward look between the scientist and security guard, and Gordon watched it intently.

"This… creature, Gordon," the scientist began, hand kneading away in his lab coat pockets, "It is… *incredibly* powerful. If the portal created by the resonance cascade had simply been a freak occurrence, then the satellite you launched would have closed it without incident. But this creature is keeping it open from the other side. Now our only choice is to send someone over to kill it. And with the military hardly trustworthy, we were forced to look to a more… local source," he said, his wry smile wrinkling his moustache into a straight line.

Slowly, Gordon nodded. What else could he do? If he said no, they would all just wait around until the complex came tumbling down onto their heads of aliens killed them. Or even the military. Gordon wouldn't put it past some determined left-behinds to try and force their way into what they saw as the impregnable Black Mesa stronghold. Besides… an alien world. If nothing else, he was going to an alien world.

His nod seemed to energise both the security guard and the scientist, the latter of whom walked over to the other side of the room while Gordon explored the storage cupboards. Inside, he found grenades, shotgun ammunition, handguns, revolvers… even a crowbar, which made Gordon smile. Looking down at his own worn tool, he realised that he wouldn't really want to trade it off for anything. Along with the HEV suit, it had been his constant companion all through this mess, and had comforted him even in his loneliest, most desperate moments.

Good old crowbar.

Instead, he scooped up a handgun that was snugly nestled in a holster and strapped it to him. Then, with a brief pause, Gordon removed the handgun and slotted the revolver into place instead. It was the Barney thing to do, he decided. Looking around, he found another belt with three grenades slotted into the relevant holes, and wrapped that, too, around his waist. He picked up a box of .357 bullets for the revolver (which he assumed was the right ammunition) and a box of shotgun shells. Gordon wordlessly left one storage room and entered the next.

There, he found something that made him smile like he imagined an action hero would. A belt that went diagonally across the chest, designed for shotgun shells. With more than a little relish, he slipped the shotgun shells into the relevant slots and wrapped it over his shoulder and down under his arm. He even found a pocket on the handgun belt to put the box of revolver ammo.

Still saying nothing to his newfound friends, Gordon wandered out of the storage room and to the shotgun the scientist had earlier discarded. A box of shotgun shells sat in an open red box beside it, and Gordon loaded it up. He heard the security guard walk up behind him, but didn't stop loading.

"You ready?"

Gordon finished loading and turned around.

"Oh. I'm ready."

With a smile, he cocked the shotgun. Martha was back, baby.

The security guard seemed well aware of the coolness of the gesture and smirked appreciatively. The scientist at the far end of the room, however, was lost on such matters, and instead pressed some buttons on a nearby control panel. The wall in front of him opened up like one of those secret compartments in spy movies. Inside, a small jetpack-looking device sat on a pedestal, lit from above like an antique on display. He recognised it instantly from the training sessions at Black Mesa.

"This, Mr Freeman, is a Long Jump Module, created expressly for navigation in the world beyond. I certainly hope you received Long Jump training, because once you are in Xen, you will need it." He picked up the module and turned to him strap-side first.

Gordon walked over and let him slip it on him like a butler.

"Xen?" he asked over his shoulder.

"Yes. Xen with an 'X'. It seemed like a nice name at the time." The scientist, now finished strapping him into the machine, patted him on the shoulder. "I would advise you to practise the Long Jump before crossing over."

It sounded more like a friendly tip than life-saving advice.

The scientist padded over to another control panel beside some immense metal blast doors. He punched in a code and they roared open, revealing a scanner area before the corridor beyond. Gordon started forward when his stomach, in protest at his sudden movement, grumbled loudly. He exchanged a sheepish glance with the scientist, who just smiled and fished around in his pockets for something. Finally he found it in his right coat pocket, bringing up something wrapped in foil.

"I brought it as a quick lunch. But I lost my appetite as the day went on."

Gordon cautiously took it. "What is it?"

"Tuna sandwich."

Looking down at the foil, he frowned. Gordon *hated* tuna.

He unwrapped the foil and ate the sandwich in two seconds.

With that done, he started once again for the scanner. It whirred as Gordon walked over it, his weapons setting off a slight bleep. He looked back to the pair for confirmation that he was okay to proceed. The security guard, now stood right behind him, impatiently nodded for him to go on.

Gordon walked into the corridor and followed it off to the left, where two more metal door awaited him. These slid open as he approached them, revealing the teleportation chamber beyond. He almost tripped over his own feet as he wandered, slack-jawed, into the enormous room. The sheer *scale* of it… breathtaking.

Four enormous stone pillars stood around an enormous pit in the ground, curving inwards like focus points towards a yellow and silver cylindrical structure in the centre. A indented circle in the ceiling held a bright white lens at the middle, which Gordon assumed had at least something to do with the process.

"Hello, Freeman! I'm up here! Practice your Long Jump if you must, but hurry up!"

Up in the higher left side of the room, a yellow walkway sprouted horizontally out of the wall, ending with a control panel with a glass booth in front, stopping just before the huge pit. A figure in a lab-coat walked from the door at the far end of the walkway and to the control panel. His voice carried surprisingly well in the huge chamber.

But still, Gordon did as he was told. He looked around and saw the doorway through which he had entered had slammed shut, sealing him to his chosen fate. He blew out a shaky breath. No turning back now.

Gordon started walking forward, trying to remember his training. It was crouch, then jump forward. Crouch, then jump forward.

Silently mouthing the words to himself, Gordon went along with the stages. He walked, crouched, then jumped-

An almost inaudible hiss from the module threw him forward. With a grunt, he swung his legs forward, the hiss fading as he landed. It was an odd experience, using the Long Jump Module. Because no matter how fast you hit the ground, your momentum always just stopped dead, and with no ill effects. That he knew of.

He looked back to the impressed looking security guard, who was only now just catching up with him. The guard opened his smiling mouth to say something, but the scientist above interrupted them. Gordon's view of him was blocked by yellow pillar in the middle of the pit.

"All right, I can open the portal now. The process is complicated, and once it's begun I must *not* be interrupted, or I will have to start all over again. *Don't* enter the beam until I give the okay! Understood?" Gordon opened his mouth to reply, but the scientist continued on. "I will begin."

He looked over to the guard, who smiled, shrugged and offered Gordon his hand. "I'm Andy Wilder."

"Gordon-"

"Freeman, yeah, I got that. You're becoming quite the legend around here."

Gordon's look was obviously dubious, because Wilder just laughed. "Do you, uh… know where you're standing?"

"Standing?"

Wilder looked around as he spoke. "Yeah, there's a platform you need to jump from… ah. There it is," he said, pointing just in front of him. He looked to Gordon, smirking. "Guess you picked the right place to jump to, huh?"

"That seems to be happening a lot lately."

The security guard ignored him. "If you jump from that yellow and black striped platform there," he said, pointing to a piece of the floor that seemed to jut out into the pit from where they were standing. "That yellow thing," he said, pointing to the yellow structure in the centre, "will come down soon, and there'll be this little pedestal thing. That's where the portal will open up."

Gordon nodded. The pillars started moving away from the centre, the noise reverberating all around the chamber. Gordon took one last look around before focusing on the task at hand. Off to the right, a red ladder led up to an observation deck. Oh, to be the crew monitoring these experiments…

Behind him, directly in line with the yellow and black striped platform Wilder had pointed out to him, was some closed metal blast doors. Gordon wondered what scientific wonders were beyond that door. Wonders he would probably never see again.

God, how was he even going to get back? *Was* he ever going to get back? Would he die in an alien world, surrounded by unfamiliar surroundings? Would anyone even care?

The yellow structure in the centre came apart slightly with a hiss, and lowered itself, revealing the pedestal in the centre to which Wilder had referred. There was a flash of light, and when Gordon opened

his eyes, a beam of energy was firing down from the lens in the ceiling, hitting the pedestal.

But that wasn't what had attracted Gordon's attention. There were things floating in the air. Three of them, in fact. Bulbous heads, like upside-down pears, with a dangling, impossibly thin body hanging below it. The heads pulsed and throbbed, occasionally opening slightly, revealing a golden light inside. They formed a triangle in front of him.

The one on the left put its' hands together for a few moments before flinging them apart. A yellow orb of energy shot out towards him.

"Watch it…" Wilder cautioned.

Gordon ducked the blast, and it exploded loudly on the ground behind him.

"Whoa!" Wilder yelled. He looked down to the scorch mark, and then back to Gordon. "Seriously, watch it."

But Gordon's eyes were locked on the creatures. The left-hand one once again opened fire, this time unleashing a volley of four orbs on him. Gordon ran forward, shotgun in hand. Three of the orbs only just missed him, exploding against the ground behind him with a resounding bang each time. The fourth skimmed his back and hit the ground, managing to knock him off his feet. Gordon turned the fall into a forward roll, ending up on his back and pointing his shotgun up at the attacking creature.

The distinctive pop of a handgun going off attracted both the attention of Gordon and the alien above him, drawing their collective gazes to Wilder. He was firing random pot-shots at the alien above Gordon, obviously thinking him in distress. Heedless of the two others, he went unaware of the golden orbs shooting towards him until they collided with his right arm. Gordon got to his feet and started running. The appendage exploded on impact, throwing him

back against the wall, a trail of blood following him. He lay against the wall, screaming.

Gordon skid to a halt, looking from the writhing guard to the three aliens. He watched as the middle creature turned and headed towards the scientist on the walkway. Determination setting his features, Gordon ran for the observation platform. Grasping the shotgun by the barrel, he climbed up the ladder and hopped up to the platform. Keeping an eye on the creatures, particularly the one closing in on the scientist, Gordon ran to the ledge of the platform, leaping onto one of the pillars.

He slipped slightly, but managed to regain traction long enough to clamber to the top of the pillar. Now on a level playing field with the creatures, he could now see them up close. And they weren't pretty. Glowing yellow eyes and small, fanged mouths… genuinely the stuff of nightmares. Gordon was only too happy to shove a shotgun in their faces. One was close enough on his left to take out with one shot, the metal pellets ripping through the bulbous head like fruit. With a shrill cry, it tumbled through the air to the ground.

The second was now just on the other side of the scientists' booth, who was now looking rather nervous as he feverishly tried to concentrate on the teleportation. Gordon cocked the shotgun and fired. The first blast caught the creature one the side of the head, sending it whirling back like a top. He reloaded and fired again, this time killing it and sending it, too, to the ground.

The third, this one the same creature that had been attacking him before, floated around the teleporter, too far away for the shotgun to reach. Gordon kept his left hand on the reloading mechanism of the shotgun and pulled out his revolver with the right. Trusting his instincts, he aimed and fired. The recoil from the small weapon was immense, and he almost ended up hitting himself in the face. But his aim was dead on, puncturing the creature's head and sending it diving to the ground.

Gordon looked over to the scientist, whose bearded face he could make out much more clearly. The teleporter was making a lot of noise now, and he struggled to make himself heard over the whirring din.

"We're almost there, Freeman! Get yourself in position!"

Gordon nodded, turned, and slid down the arched tower, landing on the ground running. He instantly ran to the bleeding Wilder, who was lying next to the metal doors opposite the platform.

"Are you-?"

He heard another shrill cry from above, and saw two more of the creatures floating around the teleporter and over to him. No, three… four.

Suddenly, for a brief second, all the noise and light in the room seemed to be drawn towards the pedestal. Then, with a brilliant flash of light, a golden-white portal awaited him, ready to take him to this new world… this 'Xen'. The scientist's voice rang out from across the chamber.

"It's ready! You must go, now!"

Gordon looked back to Wilder.

"Go…" he whispered harshly, his pale skin and sweaty brow making him seem all the more desperate.

The doors beside Gordon opened up.

And a soldier stepped through, M4 rifle uniformly held in front of him. His gasmask hid any expression, but even Gordon could tell he was alarmed. The soldier spotted him. And suddenly, in a moment of complete instinct, both he and Gordon brought their weapons to bear, standing before one another with weapons shoved in their faces. He could hear the screeching of the creatures as they closed

in on them. Through the green lenses of the gasmask, Gordon could see the soldier glancing at the aliens.

"Hurry up, Freeman! I can't keep it open forever!"

The scientist sounded desperate. *Very* desperate. He and the soldier stared at each other a moment longer. Gordon started to squeeze the trigger. Then the soldier did something very unexpected. He turned his rifle and opened fire on something just behind Gordon. He turned and saw one of the aliens flop down onto its' back, hot bullet holes scorched through its' head.

Gordon whipped his gaze around to the soldier, alarmed.

His only reply was a wry nod towards the portal. A nod that said 'I think you have somewhere to be'.

He glanced back to the portal, and then to the soldier.

Gordon nodded, turned and ran. Machinegun fire roared out behind him. A soldier's farewell to a soldier killing scientist. The aliens screeched in horror as they died and watched their quarry make his escape.

The last noise Gordon heard was the screech of an alien, an explosion, and the scientist wailing.

Then flashes of green.

Then nothing.

(A/N: I hadn't originally planned on having Gordon and Shephard meet, but this seemed like such a good idea, I couldn't pass it up. Unfortunately (and completely coincidentally), BlindAcquiescence pulled a similar stunt in his story 'Half-Life 2: Shephard's Epic'. Just so no-one thinks I stole the idea or anything…

Anyway, this chapter ended up being far longer than I intended, mostly due to the chapter in the game being longer than I remembered. But, in the end, I think this is one of my favourites. I loved the mental image of Gordon armed to the teeth. Very cool, I thought.

But anyway, enough of what I liked! Review!

Next Chapter: We Are Not Alone)

We Are Not Alone

-1Disclaimer: I don't own *Half-Life.*

(A/N: Many clear and well spoken thanks to hhgbh!)

The Black Mesa Incident

Chapter Twenty Seven: We Are Not Alone

Shephard pulled himself along the ground and fully out of the vent and heaved himself to his feet. He was in a tall, grey corridor that went immediately off to the right and then left at the end. The heavy noise of the machinery became even louder as he walked down the corridor, and he adjusted his sweaty grip on his M4. Around the corner, a heavy metal door stood in front of him, a simple two buttoned control panel the only impediment to his advancement. A sudden lack of light and noise that made Shephard's ears pop made him freeze in his tracks. It was like it was being… *pulled* through the door.

A flash of light from behind the door quickly restored everything to relative normality. From behind the door, a voice echoed, desperate and breathy.

"It's ready! You must go, now!"

His grip on his rifle ever tighter, Shephard pushed the button, and the doors opened. What he saw before him stopped him from going any further. An immense glowing machine sat in the middle of an even larger chamber, giant curved pillars standing up like hooks around a glowing orb of light in the centre. Floating shapes around the structure quickly revealed themselves as more aliens, but a type that Shephard had never seen before. Large, bulbous heads with impossibly skinny bodies beneath. And they were floating towards him.

No… not towards *him*…

Shephard's gaze quickly fell to the shape down beside him. A bleeding security guard sat against the wall beside the open door. Gordon Freeman knelt over him, staring up at Shephard like he had seen a ghost. Without hesitation, Shephard brought his rifle to bear.

Freeman's reflexes surprised him. The scientist was instantly on his feet, SPAS-12 shotgun firmly aimed between his eyes.

And so they stood, the soldier and scientist. This was what Shephard needed. A clear enemy. No possibly sentient aliens. No Black Ops sent to 'clean up'. Just an enemy that was out to destroy everything Shephard fought for.

That same desperate voice rang out again throughout the chamber, sounding like he was in the full throes of hysteria.

"Hurry up, Freeman! I can't keep it open forever!"

Shephard couldn't help but shoot a quick glance to the several floating aliens that were making their way towards them. His eyes whipped down to the floating orb of energy in the centre of the machine.

' *Keep it open'.*

It was a portal. A result of advanced science that was so far above Shephard's head it made his brain hurt thinking about it. And these… things obviously didn't want Freeman going through. Shephard took in the scientist before him.

A shotgun, some kind of strange contraption strapped to his back, an entire belt of shotgun shells wrapped around his chest with a revolver tucked away in a holster. Grenades slotted into another belt that hung off the smooth surface of the HEV suit, which under the shining light of the orb beyond him made him look like some mythical warrior. And a crowbar strapped to his thigh.

The crowbar was *real?*

The crowbar was real.

But something was clear; Freeman was going to war. And these creatures didn't want him as their enemy.

Which meant Freeman wasn't Shephard's enemy at all. Which also meant that one more thing Shephard had clung to since landing in this Godforsaken place was a lie.

One of the aliens floated just behind Freeman, golden energy growing beneath its' spindly hands. Shephard edged his aim off to the left and fired, the bullets tearing straight through the creature and knocking it on its' back.

Freeman turned in time to see it flop to the floor, lifeless, before looking back to him. The stunned expression on his face matched Shephard's. He had just saved Gordon Freeman. This man had killed countless soldiers, fellow comrades, and Shephard was helping him. But something about the bearded, bespectacled scientist seemed so desperate, almost pleading. A man like that would never kill unless it was needed. And Shephard had seen behaviour from his fellow soldiers today that made him ashamed to be wearing the uniform.

So maybe things weren't as clear cut as the mission briefings and boot camps and inspirational speeches would make one believe. Because, right now, Gordon Freeman seemed like the only truly good man he had seen from this place.

He nodded to the glowing orb that pulsed in the centre of the machine. Freeman glanced back at the portal, then looked back to Shephard. He just nodded, turned, and ran.

One of the creatures to the right started making a dive for him, energy growing between its' spindly hands. Shephard knelt down and took aim, blowing it out of the sky with a few bursts from his rifle.

He watched as Freeman leapt at the light. Shephard heard a shrill cry that could have only come from something inhuman before there was an explosion from the other side of the room.

Shephard heard that same voice wailing in despair as Freeman disappeared in a flash of pure white light, taking the orb with him. The lights went down, and klaxons sounded. A faded green orb flashed in and out of existence where Freeman's exit had been, sending stray bolts of green energy lancing out. Everything the bolts struck exploded on impact, scorching metal and raining sparks all over the chamber.

He looked back to the security guard, who had lost an arm. He was either unconscious from blood loss or dead. Either way, there was nothing Shephard could do for him.

A screech from above attracted his attention to the two remaining head creatures, who, having missed their opportunity to kill their number one enemy, were only too happy to move on to second best.

Shephard considered retreat, but the door had already slammed shut behind him, with no obvious way to open it again. He started running, dodging from side to side to give his airborne enemies a hard time. Hell, he didn't even know what kind of blasts or lasers they used. An explosion sounded behind him, and Shephard chanced a quick look over his shoulder to see small golden orbs of energy popping against the ground behind with shocking bangs, leaving smoking scorch marks where they impacted.

Eventually, Shephard reached the other side of the huge device, coming to a walkway that had collapsed forward, making a ramp up to the door at the top of the room. Or at least, it would have led to the door if a glowing orb of a portal wasn't standing in the way. Shephard paused, not particularly wanting to go through and face whatever the hell was on the other side.

An orb flew just past his head, hitting the control panel at the end of the walkway. It exploded in a brilliant flash, showering Shephard in

sparks, buttons and shards of circuit boards. A dead scientist, bushy beard soaked with blood, lay crumpled beneath the panel, his face badly burnt from a blast from the creatures. Shephard looked up to the portal.

He supposed there were worse places to be. Without looking back, he scrambled up onto the walkway and started his uphill sprint. He never paused as he ran straight for the portal and leapt in.

Green flashed before his eyes like a strobe light. His body was frozen in that single position; unable to move, unable to even think. Shephard wanted to close his eyes against the lights, but his body refused to respond to his brain.

And then, suddenly, a second later, he was running forward again. Except now, he was somewhere completely different. He skid to a halt as soon as he took in his surroundings, kicking up some pebbles off the side of the island on which he was now stood. His rifle jerked out of his hand from the sudden stop, falling with the rocks. He watched as the weapon tumbled down into the purple, cloudy nothingness below.

Jesus fucking Christ. He was on another planet. Or at least, somewhere that *wasn't* Earth. He could see floating islands above and below him, at least a dozen or so of them. But nothing else for as far as the eye could see. Just a brief cluster of islands, and then… nothing. Breathtaking wisps of purple mist in the distance stood out against a green sky, white lights shining through as the clouds gradually danced away.

Shephard was so enraptured he almost forgot that he would probably never get out of this place alive. He hadn't noticed any portals on the islands above or below. He was going to spend the rest of his life here… in this void. The thought alone made him want to scream.

An audible scream replied to his mental cry, a portal suddenly exploding into existence in the middle of the sky. A scientist fell

screaming from the air, a green object about a quarter of his size falling with him. Shephard could only watch as the scientist tumbled and came to a messy end on an island below. He closed his eyes shut rather than watch the impact. The crunching noise was enough.

He opened his eyes and checked the body. There was definitely something that came through with the scientist. Shephard looked from the island on which he now stood to the island below. Luckily, it wasn't that far down, or far away. He would be able to make that jump rather comfortably. He backed up to the very edge of the island, and ran, kicking off when he reached the ledge.

There was less gravity here. Shephard didn't think that made much sense, but it was true. When he jumped, he felt like he was jumping at least twice as far as he should. Which meant that he had horribly misjudged his leap. He flailed around, trying to stop his overshot of a jump as he glided almost clear over the island. Just as he passed it, he managed to claw a grip on the very edge, raking dirt and muck under his fingernails as he struggled to stop his descent. Eventually, he stopped, and allowed himself a brief sigh of relief before throwing his other arm up and heaving himself up topside.

The white, wiry haired scientist that lay crumpled before him looked in a constant state of shock, staring up to the sky with a frozen expression of alarm. After carefully closing his eyes, Shephard got to inspecting the device the slightly overweight man had brought with him.

It was the Displacer. The device he had seen a diagram of back in that Black Mesa office. With Gruber and Andes…

He shook the memory away and got back to studying the device. Well, it was certainly military green, which made Shephard curious as to who exactly Black Mesa was making the weapon for. It was an angular tube shape roughly the length of his own forearm and twice and thick. A wing shape grew out of tip of the device, going out on the left hand side before it stopped at the back, making it look more like a miniature spacecraft than a weapon. The 'wing' was hollowed

out with a thick handle, like those on a motorcycle, bridging the gap between the central body and the outer portion of the wing.

Shephard experimentally picked it up, holding it by the handle and the bottom. He felt his thumb press down on something, and he looked down to see a red button on the handle fully depressed. The machine started bleeping and shaking, the front end opening up like the maw of some sleeping beast. Turquoise blue and light green electricity emanated from the front of the device, dancing all around it.

He looked around the area, hoping that perhaps he had missed another possible exit. Finding none, he closed his eyes and waited for the bang as the beeping grew faster.

Instead, he got a flash of green.

Then nothingness.

(A/N: Since this is such a small chapter, I thought I'd treat you peeps and include the next chapter as well.

Next Chapter: Crush Depth)

Crush Depth

-1Disclaimer: I don't own *Half-Life.*

(A/N: Continuous thanks from the last chapter to hhgbh for beta work!)

The Black Mesa Incident

Chapter Twenty Eight: Crush Depth

Shephard opened his eyes once the flashing was over. He was in a dark corridor. He was in a dark corridor! On Earth! He grinned beneath his gasmask, looking down to the Displacer as his new saviour.

Light came through two glass elevator doors on his left. Looking around, he found no other way out; both ends of the corridor had collapsed in on themselves long ago. And what was that pressure around his ears? It was that irritating feeling of desperately needing the ears to pop after swimming.

A thick leather strap on the Displacer allowed Shephard to sling it across his torso like a mailman's bag. He slipped the far more comfortable Desert Eagle out of its' holster and opened the doors of the elevator. The lift itself wasn't a particularly comforting one; metal latticework on the floor and ceiling let him see everything in the shaft above and below, and considering how high up he, was that wasn't particularly welcome. He cautiously reached over and pushed the only button he could find.

With a long, continuous groan, the elevator descended, and the pressure on Shephard's ears worsened to the point where he cupped a futile hand over one of them to try and keep whatever it was out. The elevator came to an sudden, jolting halt at some more

glass doors. They slid open for him once the elevator had well and truly stopped.

The entire room was bathed in an aquatic colour. Shephard could see the shadowy reflection of water waving along he ceiling, and he looked around the find the source. On his left, the corridor opened up into a larger room. On his right as he entered, a tank of misty water held three or four thick, grey wormlike creatures. Their fronts looked more like the sucker of a plunger than anything threatening. His mild curiosity satiated, Shephard turned and walked to a door on the other side of the room.

A retinal scanner beside the door didn't inspire much confidence from Shephard, and, finding no other control panel, he started to worry. But then again, the corridor had gone off to the right as well. So Shephard backtracked to the elevator, casting a curious glance at the worm creatures as he went.

The corridor off to the right led to some more glass doors, these ones broken and jagged. Shephard had to smash the remaining broken glass with the Displacer before he could slide through. A large sign welcomed him into the room beyond.

'HYDROFAUNA STUDIES LABORATORY'.

Underwater animals, and probably bugs at that. Fascinating.

Shephard stepped out into the lab beyond. Large windows on the right gave a view out into a water tank, the rocky floor and walls of the tank littered with various fungi and, curiously, no fauna in sight. Inside, at the very centre of the tank, a scientist in some kind of radiation suit stood in a glass cubicle. It was framed by white metal, with a very strange framework inside. A similar box was placed in the far left of the windows, closer to Shephard. The scientists looked over to him. His voice came booming over some unseen radio, and Shephard almost leapt into the air.

" *I'm afraid I trapped myself here to escape those…"* He gestured vaguely with his hand, *"… beasts. Please. Would you be* so kind *as to operate that transporter?"* The thick ladles of sarcasm oozing from every word didn't really engender helpful thoughts from Shephard, but the fact was, he needed someone to open the doors so he could get the hell out. So, smug, arrogant scientist it was.

But still, something bothered Shephard.

' *Beasts'?*

He cautiously moved forward into the lab. On his left, a control panel blocked his view of anything behind it. A thoroughly alien growl came from behind the panel. A fleshy yellow blur leapt out at his face. It was one of those spiny creatures he had fought in the parking garage, but not since.

Shephard threw himself onto his back, letting the creature sail over him and collide with the window on the other side. It bounced off and thumped to the floor. Without pause, it quickly got back to its' miniscule feet and shook of the impact. But Shephard was already pointing the Desert Eagle straight in its' pointy, jagged little face.

Again, the booming voice of the scientist startled him.

" *Don't use the gun, you moron! You'll break the glass and flood the whole chamber!"*

Scowling, Shephard rolled out of the way as the creature leapt at him again. Another of the creatures leapt up on to the control panel, not wanting to miss out on all the fun its' companion was having. But now they were both almost next to each other, and with no glass behind them. Shephard took aim.

" *Well, don't shoot* now! *For God's sake, that's delicate equipment! It could blow sky high!"*

Shephard fired, shooting both of the creatures dead centre with pinpoint precision. He stood up and looked over at the scientist through the water, pointing a cautioning finger in his direction.

"Shut. Up."

He heard a distinct grumble about trigger-happy something-or-others, but chose to ignore it as he walked around the control panel. None of the buttons really seemed to scream 'activate the teleporter', and he started to flounder.

An exasperated groan came from the radio.

" *The yellow one, the yellow one, for God's sake, the yellow one! Good Lord, you're worse than Freeman."*

The very mention of the near-legendary figure gave Shephard pause, but he put it aside and pushed the button. With a flash of light, the scientist was gone. After a few seconds of nothing, Shephard started to worry that he had killed the scientist. But them, in the cubicle behind the white bars, another flash of green light yielded the spacesuit clad scientist. The bars slid aside compliantly for him.

"Thank you *so much* for releasing me-" He rolled his eyes. "Oh, you're a *soldier.* Wonderful. I couldn't tell from inside the tank. I suppose you're going to ask me all sorts of questions about Gordon Freeman, and if I refuse to answer, you'll blow a hole in my kneecaps, is that it?"

Shephard found it hard to look the scientist in the face as he replied. It was because he was ashamed. Ashamed of what his own people would do. An army he had believed in, a government he had believed in…

He shook his head. "No."

This seemed to take the scientist aback slightly, who straightened up somewhat. "Oh. I see. Well, it would have been in your best interests *not* to kill me, anyway. After the whole incident back at Anomalous Materials, everything here went into lockdown. I can help you access any secured area in this lab." He tapped against the glass cover of his helmet, indicating his eyes. "Valuable retinas, you see."

Something about the gesture made Shephard smile. Or maybe it was that fact that he had found someone completely unfazed by these events. For some reason that made him feel far better.

He extended out a hand. "Corporal Adrian Shephard."

For a moment, the scientist just stared down at the offered appendage, appearing unsure of what to do with it. Finally, though, he slowly reached out and took it, steadily shaking it.

"Doctor Arne Magnusson."

Shephard nodded, lowering the hand. "There's a locked door this way," he said, jabbing a thumb in the relevant direction.

Magnusson made a grand wave with his arm. "Lead the way, Shephard."

As they walked, Shephard couldn't help but notice that Magnusson's pace was so determined, he was actually getting ahead of him. No fear. Shephard liked that.

"So you knew Freeman?"

Although he couldn't really tell because of the helmet, Shephard could tell Magnusson was casting a suspicious glance his way.

"This isn't some reverse-psychology ploy, is it? Pretend to be my friend, get my information and then kill me?"

"Not that I'm aware. Besides, I met *him*, and I didn't kill him."

"Did you try?"

He thought for a moment. "We both did."

They reached the room with the worm thing in the tank, and Magnusson walked straight to the retinal scanner. He leant forward, then cursed when the scanner returned a negative noise. Angry gloved hands clamped onto each side of the helmet he wore and tried to tug it off.

"Damn… helmet…"

Shephard reached off and released the latches on either side.

Magnusson removed the helmet with ease. After a quick look down to the offending headwear and then back to Shephard, he nodded in gratitude.

"Thank you."

"How did you get into that thing without fastening the latches?"

"Well, *I* didn't put it on me, for a start," he snapped irritably. "It was…" he sighed. "I've had a long, complicated two days. Do you *really* want to hear every detail?"

"Not really."

"At least you're honest," Magnusson allowed with a nod. Helmet tucked under his arm, he ruffled up his black, wiry hair, although whether it was naturally that way or a result of the shiny hair product that was on there, Shephard couldn't tell. Magnusson stooped at the scanner, and the door opened.

The next corridor held some small observation tanks in the wall on the left. They too held the worm creatures.

"What are they?"

Magnusson was concentrating on moving forward, but still bothered with a cursory glance to what Shephard was referring. "Hm? Oh, they've been dubbed 'leeches'. Which is, by far, an understatement. They will latch onto anything and bleed it dry. People, batteries… even objects like metal."

Shephard paused to inspect the creatures as his scientist companion pressed on to the end of the corridor, where another locked door with retinal scanner awaited them. He walked over as Magnusson activated the scanner.

"How long… have you been collecting these things?"

There was no reply. Magnusson just watched the door open and stepped into the room inside. Large windows on the left looked into another tank of water, bathing the room in an aqua blue glow.

"Magnusson."

He stopped.

"How long?"

For a few moment, he was silent, and Shephard suspected he would just ignore him again. But, after another long pause, he sighed and turned back to the soldier, suddenly looking far older.

"Long enough to learn all of their names."

This little word game wasn't going down well with Shephard. "Months? Years?"

"About a year and a half."

"And did you know this would happen?"

Looking fidgety, Magnusson turned and started working on a control panel beside a large contraption that sat in the middle of the room. It resembled the teleporter Magnusson appeared from earlier. "No.

With the crystal samples we were getting, there was no way we could have created a reaction this large. But yesterday… we got something incredibly pure." He stopped working, staring out into space. *"Impossibly pure…* there was simply no way we could have brought a sample so pure back from Xen through one of our portals… I still don't know how it ended up in our hands…"

"What?"

Magnusson's gaze whipped over to him, as though surprised he was still there. "Oh," he cleared his throat, "nothing, nothing. Just rambling, that's all. Anyway," he said, pressing one last button on the control panel and walking over to the other side of the room, "this would seem to be our only way out."

He tapped the glass of the windows, indicating the glass.

"But! I don't really fancy the idea of smashing the glass and flooding us, do you? So, we'll use *this* teleporter to get ourselves out *there* ."

Shephard looked at the cubicle in the middle of the room. "But… it's sparking."

"Hm?"

"The button inside. It's sparking."

"Oh, that's nothing. Does it all the time, I expect."

"You *expect?* You mean you don't work here?"

"Not in this area, no."

"Then where *do* you work?"

He sighed as he walked into the teleporter chamber. "I believe the correct vernacular now would be 'where *did* I work?'. Somehow I doubt I'll be receiving another pay check from Black Mesa again." Impatiently, he waved the soldier over. "Are you coming?"

Stuck between a rock and a very annoying place, Shephard just sighed and walked inside. It was a little close for comfort, but since it was only temporary, he could live with it.

"So? Where did you work?"

"I used to work with the *indomitable* Doctor Freeman himself. I was at what you might call 'ground zero'. Afterwards, I tried to escape with some colleagues, fell into a portal along the way, and, well… like I said. A long and complicated day."

"What was he like? Freeman."

"Well, let's see," Magnusson said, fitting on his helmet. Shephard helped him with the clasps on either side. "Always late, always fraternising with security guards when he should have been working, tended to nod off at every occasion… honestly, I don't know where this 'unstoppable killing machine' tripe is coming from."

Shephard finished the final clasp and patted it out of habit to make sure it was secure. "Well, he certainly looked capable when I saw him."

"Oh, it's that damned beard. Makes him look far more world-weary than he is. He's only twenty seven, for God's sake. Let him get to my age and then he won't have to pretend to look like that." Magnusson turned to the button to activate the teleporter.

"How old are you?"

The scientist paused. "Look, I realise you saved my life, but honestly, that does not entitle you to such personal information."

He jabbed an angry finger into button.

"So… very old."

Magnusson glared at him as the machine started up. Green and blue bolts of energy danced around them. Two golden crystals placed

directly opposite each other began transmitting a beam of energy to one another. Suddenly, from the very centre of the beam, a lance of white energy sprang out and hit the control panel Magnusson had been working on earlier. It vanished in a flash.

Shephard looked out to the water tank and saw the same control panel slowly sinking to the flowerbed at the bottom. He looked back to Magnusson.

"Just… wait," he commanded defiantly, putting up a hand to stop any comment from the soldier. After a few more mistrials the energy beam lanced to the bottom of the teleport chamber, somehow filling it with white energy.

Then a flash.

Water seeped in through his gasmask, and Shephard struggled not to panic as he felt the water stinging his unprepared nose. He felt someone tapping on his shoulder, and Magnusson floated beside him, looking despicably comfortable in his containment suit. He pointed to an open tunnel in front of them, and Shephard nodded. Moving surprisingly fast for someone in such a cumbersome outfit, Magnusson led the way to the opening, but quickly stopped and swam back.

Confused, Shephard watched him furiously scramble to the surface. He looked back to the opening and watched as a huge red fish that could have only been alien raced towards him. Shephard followed Magnusson's example and swam for the surface. The scientist had already disappeared from view. When Shephard burst from the water, a white gloved hand reached out to him. Shephard clasped onto Magnusson's arm, and the scientist yanked him, the two toppling back onto the ground above beside each other. They both stared up at the ceiling, catching their collective breaths

"And," Shephard panted, "what is *that* called?"

"Ichthyosaur. After the dinosaur."

"There was a dinosaur *like that?"*

"W-" Magnusson stopped himself. "Do you *really* care right now? Honestly?"

Shephard shook his head. "No."

"Right, good. Now, I hope you have some unique soldier-ly way of getting past that thing, because I am at a certain lack of ideas."

Getting to his feet, Shephard looked around. They were on a broken walkway, both ends pretty much at the bottom of the tank. All that remained of it were two small ledges on either end. And Shephard didn't fancy their chances of swimming over to what looked like a locked door with no control panel. So, he looked for a solution close to home. The rocky ceiling was only a metre or so above their heads, but there was nothing forthcoming up there either. Turning, he looked into the tunnel behind him.

Magnusson shook his head instantly. "It's blocked off. You can see that the ceiling collapsed. There's a dead body back there because of it."

Shephard looked down at him, then back to the tunnel, heading inside.

"Didn't you hear what I said? It's-"

His voice seemed to catch in his throat as he watched Shephard drag the dead body of a charred, burnt scientist to the ledge.

"Grab his feet."

"What? No! This is disgusting, disrespectful-"

"-and our only way out. Grab. The feet."

With a glare that told Shephard that he knew he was right but didn't want to admit it, Magnusson grabbed onto the feet.

"We'll swing him into the water, wait for two seconds, and then dive. Okay?"

Magnusson was just staring at what used to be the scientist's face.

"Magnusson!"

His whipped up his gaze to look at Shephard. "Yes, yes, of course."

"All right, on the count of three. One-" they swung the body back and forth - "Two" - and again - "Three!"

They released the body and watched it tumble into the water with a resounding splash, spraying droplets of water over them. Shephard held up his fingers as he counted.

"One, two, go!"

Both ran and leapt into the water, doing their best to sink like stones. As Shephard had hoped, the fish creature had rushed over to body as soon as it entered the weather, and was now feasting happily, oblivious to their escape.

They swam through the open tunnel and into an airlock area at the end. Shephard swam down to a crank and turned it, watching the doors close behind them a little bit more with each rotation. When they were firmly shut, he heard a secure clamping noise echo through from the other side. The water started to drain out, and Shephard swam to the surface to grab some air as the water level slowly lowered. Eventually, the room was empty, and a green light on a control panel binged affirmatively.

The door beside it swung open, welcoming them into the room beyond. Shephard went in without hesitation, but paused when he noticed that Magnusson wasn't following. He was just staring at some distant corner of the airlock.

"Magnusson. Come on."

"How…" he looked up at Shephard, pure hatred in his eyes. "How can you simply *move on* after what we just did?"

"He was already dead. We needed to survive."

"Are our lives worth that? Are they?"

Shephard's jaw tightened. "Yes. I think they are."

"And that's the difference between a soldier and a human being, I suppose."

In no mood to be judged, Shephard moved towards the scientist. "Look, Magnusson. There was nothing else we could do. I've lost so many *living* people today. There is no way in hell I'm going to lose another one over some *corpse.* So let's go."

For a long time, Magnusson just glared at him. Then, with a sudden movement, he reached for the clasps on his helmet. For a brief moment, Shephard had actually thought Magnusson would take a swing at him. He probably would have let him. As it was, Shephard just helped him remove the helmet, and they moved on.

The corridor beyond went off to the right first before a tight corner at the end off to the left. A steady hissing noise made Shephard frown, and he looked back to Magnusson.

"Decon spray," the scientist quietly explained.

Shephard nodded and walked to the entrance to the room beyond. The archway had nozzles all around it, spraying a light mist of something that smelt a lot like disinfectant. In the room beyond, Shephard could see two tables off to the right with medical supplies spread out haphazardly across them.

He took a step through the decon spray, the coolness barely registering after the swimming experience earlier. His boots

squelched from the dripping water as he walked into the medical room.

Magnusson was just following him through in a daze when two portals exploded into existence in front of them, depositing two of the dart spitting things before vanishing again. Shephard drop kicked one across the room while pulling out his wrench. The other barely had a chance to move before he crushed it into the floor with the heavy tool. He pulled out the Desert Eagle as the first creature leapt at him, blasting it back with the bullet.

After a few seconds more of quick recon, he looked back to Magnusson and indicated it was safe to proceed. He had taken one more step into the room when another teleportation event flashed in front of him.

A shining metallic blue monstrosity stood before him, stretching up from its' curled position until it towered over Shephard, almost twice his height. It's single yellow cat's-eye looked down at him, vertical eyelids blinking rapidly. With a noise between a whirr and a sneer, it lashed out with the larger of its' two right arms, knocking him across the room and into one of the metal tables. It looked to Magnusson and spoke in some alien tongue. Magnusson backed away, glancing feverishly from the alien to Shephard.

Shephard recognised the creature now. It was the same kind he and Otis had witnessed attacking those Black Mesa personnel. And it had abducted the scientist there. Remembering the blobs of electricity the creature had annihilated the security guard with, Shephard got up onto the table and leapt onto the creature's back, machete at the ready.

It let out an angry grunt and tried to grab Shephard with its' two larger upper arms. He drove the machete into the creature's shoulder, finding some satisfaction in the way it stumbled around from the pain. His satisfaction disappeared when the creature slammed him into the wall behind him, repeating the process over and over until Shephard started to wonder if the wall would give way.

The creature took another step forward and was about to slam him into the wall again when Shephard propped his boots up against the wall. When his assailant thrust himself back, Shephard kicked off from the wall, sending the creature tumbling forward and headfirst onto the metal table beside the one Shephard had impacted with earlier.

The table bent into a 'V' shape from fall. Shephard took the opportunity to rip the machete from the creature's shoulder and roll off the writhing body beneath him, quickly getting to his feet. The creature, looking well and truly pissed off now, got to it's muscular feet.

On it's lower left-hand arm, it held a darker blue creature with three blue spines growing from the front that made a sort of triangle around the middle. It looked like a giant ant but without the head or legs. A blue flash of light erupted forth, and Shephard dodged to the side. He felt the heat singe against his shoulder as he tossed the machete into the larger alien's eye.

Its' scream made Shephard wince from the shrillness, but did nothing to dull his senses. Shephard ripped his Desert Eagle from its' holster and blew as many holes into the creature as he could until he was out ammunition, the weapon clicking uselessly. The creature fell to its' knees, then toppled over forward.

Shephard stared at the creature for a few moments, breathing heavily as he satisfied himself that it was in fact dead. When he felt safe, he clicked the cocking mechanism of the Desert Eagle back into place and slipped it into his holster. He looked over at Magnusson, who was only just stood in the room.

"Are you all right?"

Magnusson didn't reply; his gaze was firmly on something behind Shephard. He turned and saw the smaller creature crawling out from under the body of it's master. It looked to Shephard, then to Magnusson, and then simply sat there, looking unsure of what to do.

With a frown, Shephard looked over at Magnusson, who just shrugged with a wide-eyed look he had hadn't seen from the scientist before.

With a cautious hand out in front of him, Shephard walked towards the creature. It didn't seem to object, even when he picked it up. He tried to hold it like a gun, and found it rather comfortable. How he would fire it he had no idea, but still… it ripped through that security guard like he was nothing, so it should be useful.

"You're not seriously going to take that thing?"

Shephard shrugged. "I've seen what it can do. It'll be useful."

"Oh, typical military thinking. I suppose you think that thing hanging off your neck there is a weapon, too."

He glanced down to the Displacer dangling by his hip. "What, the Displacer? It sure as hell looks like one."

Magnusson's eyes widened as soon as he heard the word 'Displacer'. "That's…? Well, for *God's sake*, why didn't you say so? I thought it was some useless military rocket launcher or some such until I saw it in here. But I had no idea it was…"

"What?"

"This, Mr Shephard, could be our way out of this place."

"Well, that's great, but I'm not sure how the damn thing even works."

"Oh, give it here," Magnusson grumbled, holding out a hand as though he were confiscating a porn magazine from a school student. Shephard took off the device, handing it over.

"I haven't seen this kind of alien around much," Shephard said, kneeling by the dead body and pulling his machete from the eye.

"Well, of course you haven't," Magnusson said, inspecting the Displacer as he spoke. "They're a completely different species."

Shephard, surprised, whipped his gaze around to look at him. "They're what?"

"A different species. From a different plane of existence from most of the creatures you've probably come across today. Most of them - the headcrabs, bullsquids, barnacles, hound eyes - they're from a place called Xen. But those creatures with hooks for hands, and that blue monstrosity there… we have no idea where they came from. From what I've ascertained since this mess began, they've been dubbed - rather unimaginatively, I must say - 'Race X'." He sighed. "Honestly, even that idiot Calhouncould have come up with something better."

Shephard was lost in all the information, but instead just nodded. He'd think about it later. Right now, he was a bit more interested in Magnusson's attempts to get the Displacer working.

"Right!" he announced. "Now, if I can just-"

The device started bleeping. The tired sigh that escaped Magnusson's lips accompanied an equally tired, sarcastic look at Displacer.

"Oh, damn it."

With a flash, he vanished. The Displacer tumbled to the floor, landing with a few loud clangs. Shephard rushed over to where the irascible scientist had been stood.

"Magnusson? Magnusson!"

Nothing. Not that he expected anything. If this place had taught him anything, it was that you could never hope to hold onto any companions you found along the way. Shephard knelt and picked up the Displacer, slipping it over his shoulder. With one last look around the room, hoping for some sarcastic, irritated comment from

Magnusson, Shephard walked on and out of the open doorway in the corner of the room.

He hoped that Magnusson would be okay. He was one of the few scientists Shephard liked.

Through the doorway, Shephard found himself in a pretty dark, dank tunnel, water dripping from every corner. Windows out the side showed another tank, this one showing not one but two of the Ichthyosaur creatures. He walked around the tunnel until he came to a broken, shattered gap in the tunnel below him. Across the sizeable gap was a locked airlock door. No doubt locked from the other side.

Shephard looked down to the crack in the floor of the tunnel that lead to him being a lovely little snack between two giant alien fish. And, not only that, he had no idea where he was going once he got in there.

He leapt straight in, hoping the creature he held in his arm didn't take that moment to electrocute himself and everything else in the water. He didn't sink like a stone luckily, and the fishes were focusing on something in the bottom hand corner of the tank. Shephard looked around, particularly at the stony roof. There, just behind the tunnel above him, he could see a vent in the ceiling. Casting a quick glance at the two Ichthyosaurs below first, Shephard swam up to the vent, and, after a few struggled tugs, managed to pull the vent off. He swam straight up, relief filling his lungs as he resurfaced above.

His head was poking out in a gap in a walkway of another darkened tunnel, the water level occasionally washing up and over the latticework metal. He heaved himself up and into the tunnel. He could hear something sparking from around the corner, and the sound of an automatic door opening and closing, as though jammed by something echoed down the tunnel so to him. Every drop of water from above reverberated throughout the entire tunnel.

Behind him, he could see a locked airlock door, so he head forward.

A sign in front of him read 'BIODOME DRAINAGE SYSTEM.'

Well, that could only mean good things.

Shephard smiled as he hefted the electric weapon in his arms and continued on. Looks like Magnusson wasn't completely gone, after all; he was still making snide comments inside Shephard's head.

(A/N: My secret weapon for Shephard's story revealed. Since Episode Two came out after I started the story, I didn't have an opportunity to include him in the pre-accident chapters (or I would have, trust me). And since I loved the character so much, I sought out a way to get him into the story at some point. I think this worked out pretty well, but then I would, since I wrote it.

What say you readers, hm? Review!

Next Chapter: Xen)

Xen

-1Disclaimer: I don't own *Half-Life.*

(A/N: Many thanks to hhgbh for, you guessed it, superb beta work! If I could summon it, I would have rapturous applause right about… now.)

The Black Mesa Incident

Chapter Twenty Nine: Xen

Eyes scrunched shut, the first thing Gordon heard was the high whistle of the wind. Then a tepid breeze brushing across his face. Gordon opened his eyes, and took a sharp intake of breath. Green sky surrounded him, the occasional black twirl of a cloud in the distance. He was standing on an island, seemingly floating in mid-air.

Gordon set down his shotgun and got down on all fours. Carefully, he poked his head down over the edge.

Yep. Floating.

With a shaky breath, Gordon pushed himself back until he was sitting down on the island. His fingers struggled to pick up any grit from the floor as Gordon clenched his fists. Clouds of dust followed hands as he put them on either side of his head.

Gordon Freeman. Was on another world.

And with no way back.

He lifted his head to look up at the sky. Although technically, he could have looked in any direction and seen sky. If the term for what surrounded him *was* sky. It could just be void space, or something equally as ominous. But he could breathe, that was odd thing. He had expected to be coughing and spluttering from an atmosphere

made of carbon dioxide or some such. But no, just air. Granted, a little muggy, but still air.

After a shaky sigh, Gordon heaved himself to his feet, scooping up the shotgun with one hand, letting it dangle idly by his side as he took in the 'landscape' around him. A much larger central island sat down below him, half a dozen or so smaller islands like the one he was stood on orbiting it. No, not orbiting the island itself, but the three tall spires protruding from it like antennae. Electricity spiralled up the length of the spires before disappearing with a small flash at the top. The process repeated itself hypnotically.

Looking down further, Gordon saw that the central island had an indentation in the middle before it regained its' full size at the bottom. It made it look like a sandwich. True, a green, slimy, turtle shell-esque sandwich, but still… a sandwich.

A few islands just off to the left of his own were floating perfectly still in the air. It looked a bit unnerving. They weren't hovering up and down, or shaking… they were just perfectly still. But, they provided a fairly safe way down to the central island below, which seemed to be the only thing worth looking at in this place.

He gripped the shotgun with both hands and backed up to the edge of the island. After a quick crick of his neck, Gordon launched into a sprint. He reached the other ledge, crouched and pushed off, activating the Long Jump Module on his back. It hissed viciously behind him, propelling him towards the island far too fast. Gordon swung his legs forward, signalling to the Module to slow its' descent.

Gordon had landed fairly quietly on the island when he heard a teleport off to his right. On the next island, one of the electricity aliens flashed into existence, instantly looking over at him. Without time to think, Gordon launched himself across the chasm just as the creature fired, the green electricity travelling harmlessly beneath Gordon's feet.

The alien started charging another blast, but Gordon reached it well before he was finished, barrelling feet first into it and knocking it into the pale green nothingness below. It didn't scream as it fell. Almost as if it knew it was pointless. Gordon tried not to think about the fate of falling forever in nothingness as he arranged his next jump and leapt onto one of the orbiting islands.

It took some more timing, but eventually he managed to land rear-first on the main island. Surprisingly, it wasn't as rock solid as it had looked from his position above. He heaved himself to his feet and walked to the ledge, hoping to find some safe way to get to the 'corridor' below without dropping off the island completely. Looking over to the right, he found his answer.

An outcropping - not unlike a smaller version of the spires on top - stuck out just below the middle layer of the 'island sandwich'. Gordon took a few steps back before jogging to the ledge and letting himself fall onto it. It was like falling onto a lead pipe. He hit it feet first, the impact instantly slipping him up. Struggling to hold onto his strapless shotgun at the same time, Gordon managed to scramble around until he was hugging the outcropping from the side.

For a few moments, Gordon thought he might have to stay in such a position. The thought then occurred to him that he would probably be irritating people back home by doing so, so he started trying to awkwardly swing his way back up on top. Once there, he crawled forward like a caterpillar before he ended up glorious land, lying on his back to rest for a few moments.

The floor was uncomfortably hard against the back of his head. Looking around, Gordon saw what looked like a purple lantern on his left, hanging from the ceiling of the 'corridor'. On the ground beside him, small stems rose and fell, white lights on their very tips igniting when they reached full height, and blinking out again when they shrank. Once again, the magnitude of being on an alien world hit home, and Gordon had to close his eyes and concentrate on his breathing. People were depending on him. Hell, the world was

depending on him at this point. Who knew how far the reaction was carrying?

It could even be in Seattle by now. The thought of crab creatures leaping onto his brother wasn't something he relished, no matter how much they didn't get along. And so, Gordon got to his feet and started walking. The purple lantern was lower down than he had thought, and Gordon had to duck underneath to circumnavigate it.

Only a few steps forward after the lantern, something loud and electric stuck him in the back, knocking him off balance and stumbling forward. Gordon cocked the shotgun and whipped around. Nothing. Just the lantern casting its' peaceful purple hues over the ground. He was about to turn when that same lantern unleashed a bolt of purple energy, hitting him in the stomach and knocking him back against an outcropping of moist rock.

He hissed as he stretched his back to alleviate the pain, his HEV suit voice giving a helpful reminder that he had been attacked.

"Yes," he grunted quietly, "thank you for that."

With an angry electric spurt, another blast of purple energy shot out. Gordon rolled to his left, the bolt exploding against the rock and leaving a sizeable scorch mark there. A kneeling blast from the shotgun didn't seem to do much except leave the lantern swinging around wildly on its' hinge. Gordon reloaded, and the lantern fired again, hitting him in the shoulder and tossing him around and onto his front.

Looking up and ahead of him, he could see that around the corner of the circular island, another lantern awaited him. Beneath it, he saw the dead body of another HEV clad scientist, this one complete with helmet. He tried not to think about how long the body had been here, rotting in this alien place. Although, he *was* tempted to crawl over and take the helmet for himself, but a blast of purple energy from the lantern ahead hit the floor just in front of him. It deterred him somewhat. All things being equal, Gordon guessed they were

probably everywhere. He looked around for an escape route. Up was definitely out; it was too high, and the Long Jump was for just that; long jumping. If anything, it was detrimental to high jumping.

He looked to the wall for answers, and found it in the form of a small opening in the corner beside an outcropping of rock. It looked like the same material as that web Gordon had found the egg full of insect creatures in. With quick roll, he brought the shotgun about and fired, ripping the film-like material apart. Gordon smiled. Just like getting into air vents.

The two lanterns took objection to this and both fired on him as he made a mad dash for the hole, eventually diving in headfirst. Both bolts missed him, exploding loudly on the ground behind him. Gordon felt instantly grateful to his instincts for making him dive for the tunnel. As it was, the space the 'vent cover' led to was barely enough to accommodate him crawling along like a soldier under barbed wire, let alone running at his full height.

It was pitch black. Gordon tapped the spot on his belt which contained his flashlight. It switched on, albeit pointing straight down into the ground. With a low throaty grumble, Gordon just continued crawling, supposing that he should at least be grateful for the fact that he could see *anything* .

But still, the HEV suit was in need of a redesign.

The 'vent' eventually brought him out into a large enclosed… well, he supposed the term would be room, but that hardly seemed adequate. Glistening brown water beneath him went up to his ankles once he managed to clamber his way into the open air. There was the vague smell of something very fresh and tangy in the air, almost akin to those air fresheners that plugged into the wall. Only far, far more natural.

Fleshy balls stood atop four red, thin legs, dotted randomly around the room. Gordon wondered what they were for. They were smooth and pliable to the touch, almost like a stress ball. Four islands of

different shades or brown stood out of the liquid beneath him, a small pedestal on each. The pedestals had three L shaped claws keeping a yellow light in the middle, and as Gordon walked up a pale yellow hill to inspect it closer, Gordon realised that it reminded him of something.

The Anomalous Materials test chamber. The machine that had started this whole thing, and here it was, the inspiration, standing before him. Or, to be more accurate, around him. The scientists of Black Mesa must have come here, seen the design, and then passed it off as their own when they returned home. Which also meant that the pedestals were something to do with teleportation. So Gordon had a way out of this island. Whether it would take him any closer to the 'single, powerful being' he was hunting for, only God knew. But it was a snowballs chance in hell, and that was good enough for Gordon.

He looked around for some way to activate it. The centrepiece of the room, sat on a mound of yellow-white rock was an hourglass shaped structure, only without the curved glass in the middle; only the outer framework of the hourglass remained. Gordon walked over to it, and saw that it was placed in the centre of the four pedestals. A focusing point.

Nodding, he inspected the room further. Flickering lights coming from around a corner attracted his attention, and Gordon headed towards it. As he rounded the corner, he saw yellow lights dancing through an upright rectangular shape made out of the same webbing as the vent cover. Gordon walked over to it, all of his usual caution gone as he became caught up in the beauty of it all. Inside, Gordon could see four fluttering diamond shapes of the most intense, fantastic yellow.

He looked back to the teleportation 'equipment' behind him . Four diamonds, four pedestals. That was good enough for Gordon. With a thrust of the butt of his shotgun, Gordon cracked through the webbing and tore the rest away with his hand. The diamonds fluttered about in circles for a few moments, as though overjoyed by their sudden liberation. Then, remembering their purpose, they

continued on past Gordon and into the chamber beyond, each one twirling its' way towards a designated pedestal.

They settled on one each, igniting a bright turquoise light from each of the pedestals as they touched down. A gentle humming filled the air, and suddenly, bolts of blue energy fired out of each pedestal and into the ceiling, tracing an since unseen line across the pockmarked roof and to the focusing device in the centre.

The humming intensified, and with a blinding flash and a fizzled bang, a portal stood in front of Gordon, welcoming him in. He walked towards it blithely before pausing just on the threshold. He was putting an awful lot of faith into this machine. It could just as easily teleport him into a wall as it could take him somewhere useful. Who knew what was controlling it.

A rumbling from the ground behind him drew his attention, and Gordon turned around. A wall of enormous, rocky spikes slowly gouged their way through the liquid of the floor. Dust fell from the low ceiling above him, and Gordon saw more spikes descending.

Well, that was that.

Gordon turned, and leapt into the portal.

' *Single, powerful being', here I come.*

(A/N: Another double chapter folks, since 'Xen' is kinda short. Ish.

Next Chapter: Vicarious Reality)

Vicarious Reality

-1Disclaimer: I don't own *Half-Life.*

(A/N: Hhgbh! Wonderful beta! KEEP CLAPPING.)

The Black Mesa Incident

Chapter Thirty: Vicarious Reality

Around the corner of the waterlogged pipe, light shone down through a gap in the ceiling ahead. It had been broken through by a fallen pipe, giving Shephard a convenient diagonal bridge to the room above. His boots slick from the water, it was more than a little difficult to make his way up the pipe, but he managed to clamber up by grabbing onto the ledge above. Throwing his electric companion over first, Shephard then latched on with his other arm and pulled himself up onto a walkway, having to squeeze himself through the guardrail to get onboard.

Shephard picked up his pet weapon and looked around. The repetitive noise he had heard from the tunnel was an automatic door beside him, struggling to close around some collapsed debris from the other side. A dead security guard, reminding Shephard of Otis, lay on the floor just in front of the doors, most likely dead because of said collapse. He didn't have any weapons. The walkway overlooked a whole host of pipes, although when he hard a chance to look at them further, he realised they were tubes full of wiring. He looked down to the tunnel he had emerged from and suddenly felt quite lucky for not having been shocked to death.

The walkway led off to some stairs on the right and the left. Left was blocked by some more fallen pieces of ceiling, so Shephard chose right. Up the stairs, another dead body, this one a scientist, awaited him. He was getting tired of seeing death, so he moved on, trying not to concentrate on the smell in the air. The words 'OBSERVATION

AREA' beside a door around the corner didn't exactly engender good feelings from Shephard. If anything, they made him grip the creature in his hands tighter.

It squeaked in protest, and he looked down at it. Come to think of it, he had no idea how to use this thing. Thinking that he probably would have to before the day was done, he turned around, aiming it at the wall. He experimentally squeezed and pulled every part of the creature he could find, eventually, coming across the middle section of the creature, which, when squeezed, made it fire of a white hot bolt of energy. The scorch mark on the wall made Shephard nod and look down at the creature on his arm appreciatively.

Feeling somewhat safer, Shephard turned and walked towards the automatic door. It slid open with a low hum, allowing him entry into the dark, brown corridor beyond. It went on for quite some distance, windows on the left-hand wall allowing false sunlight onto the walls opposite. Shephard cautiously approached the window. Inside, he saw those creatures that emitted the high pitched hum randomly spread about the grassy, rocky area. But all of them were dead, yellow blood spilt messily over the shimmering grass.

A sudden movement beside him made him flinch, and he frowned as a shimmering light about the size of a tennis ball shot past him, stopping for only a moment in front of him before flying off down the corridor.

Shephard clutched the creature in his arms tighter and moved on. Inside the habitat on his right, he could see a square piece of rock face that rose up like a hatch. Further inside, Shephard could make out a secure metal door. That was the last thing he noticed as he reached the end of the row of windows, getting to the end of the corridor. Another automatic door like the one at the entrance stood before him. No sparkling light, nothing. His frown deepening, Shephard went towards the automatic door. Except it was anything but automatic. No depressurising hiss. No low hum as it opened compliantly for him. Just an angry buzz.

He tried again a few times before his jaw set and he fired the electricity alien a few times. Still nothing.

A teleportation echoed down the corridor to him, and he whipped around, weapon at the ready. Another two followed it in quick succession. He tried the door again. Nothing.

Checking he had a firm grip on his 'gun', he slowly moved down the corridor, his still damp boots clomping far too loud on the concrete floor. The familiar half-buzzing of the Race X electricity alien reached his ears, and he stood perfectly still.

Light tapping approached. He readjusted his grip.

Faster than he could have though, two of the small dart throwing creatures swung around the corner, sprinting straight for him. One on the right leapt, and Shephard jumped onto his back, aiming his weapon upwards. He fired as the creature flew over him, blasting it into the ceiling and leaving it there.

The other one, now at his side, sliced up into his leg, spraying crimson against the wall and windows. Shephard yelled in pain before ramming the weapon in his hands down onto the creature, crushing it into the floor before he opened fire. The creature exploded instantly in a flash of yellow liquid. The viscous substance stuck to his arms, and to the creature held there.

Slowly, he tried to rise, hissing in pain as his weight pushed down on his injured leg.

Come on, PCV…

He clutched the alien creature, fully aware that there was an electricity throwing alien around the corner in much better shape than him.

After a few more steps, a yellowish green ball bounced around the corner to him, trailing a tail of yellow ooze behind it as it went. It

landed silently beside Shephard, who only stared at it for a moment before leaping for the window beside him. The explosion from the alien grenade knocked him through the window and into the habitat beyond. He impacted with a ridge of mud and rock, rolling down it at such speed that any attempt to control it went badly. His grip on the bug weapon loosened, and it went flying from his grip as he collided with the grassy floor.

Struggling to breathe, Shephard tried to push himself to his feet. He heard something heavy land in front of him, and looked up to see the alien looking down on him curiously, vertical eyelids blinking over its' one large yellow eye. It had crushed Shephard's electricity bug, yellow blood still squirting as the alien moved its' foot from side to side.

It watched silently as Shephard struggled to his feet. The voice that erupted from the creature's sweaty, tentacled mouth made Shephard paused.

" *Mub, mub, mub ku ku."*

Shephard clenched his teeth. "Same to you."

He brought his machete up from his boot, aiming for the creature's head. It easily grabbed the clumsy blow with its' larger left arm. Shephard looked up into the face of his enemy, and whipped his left hand around, latching on to the creature's tentacled maw. He yanked down, pulling himself up and launching a head butt at he creature. His helmet collided with its' eye with a squelch, and Shephard saw some yellow liquid spurt out from the creature as it released him, stumbling back.

Shephard scrambled to his machete and launched it at the creature's lower right arm, hitting the wrist and releasing the electricity bug it held there. As Shephard went for it, he heard another teleportation behind him, and turned to see a completely new monster bearing down on him. This was one was about the size of two polar bears, tan coloured, and had purple tiger stripes on its' back. Four pointy

legs supported a stumpy body, the featureless head poking out of the top like a worm from the ground. Two arms stood out the front, similar in appearance to the legs. Finally, a tail in the same theme as he other appendages grew from the rear, completing the package of one ugly motherfucker.

With a pig-like snort, it seemed to notice him and clamped its' front claws together. Much like the Xen electricity aliens, it gathered electricity from seemingly nowhere, except purple. Out of the corner of his eye, Shephard watched as the electricity alien on his left blindly lumbered over towards him. He waited until the creature in front of him released its' energy blast, and dove to forward, putting his hand over his head in what he was sure was a futile gesture.

The small purple orb of energy shot across the habitat and collided with the electricity creature without a noise. Shephard looked back over his shoulder, and saw the creature clutching its' now glowing it stomach. It' eye whipped up to look at Shephard before it exploded into dozens of fleshy yellow pieces, spraying him in blood. Another snort from in front of him have Shephard his cue, and he quickly got to his feet and rolled for the electric bug gun from his fallen enemy. Rolling, scooping it up and aiming in one smooth movement, Shephard unloading everything the creature had on the giant alien opposite him.

Blue energy danced around the creature as the bolts hit it, and for a moment, he thought he was going to have to dodge another blast. But then, with an alarmed grunt, the creature exploded, much like its' supposed comrade had done. With a relieved exhalation, Shephard relaxed and lay on his back. The creature in his arms squealed in protest and wriggled violently in his arms. Feeling tired anyway, Shephard was in no mood to be fucked about with, so he just tossed the creature away like baseball.

It flipped in midair, landing on its' spindly feet before coming towards him. What was once a mere annoyance suddenly became a little more dangerous, and Shephard got to his feet, the angry noises coming from the creature doing nothing to calm his nerves. After a

minute long gargle, it leapt out at him. Shephard crushed it to the floor with the wrench. He looked down to the crushed weapon beneath him.

"Huh."

Somehow, he had expected it to be harder. Kneeling down, he picked up his machete and slipped it into his boot holster. The leg cut was feeling a lot better. Not that he would like to go on the Boot Camp obstacle course anytime soon, but it would get him through this hellhole well enough. Shephard smiled at the fact that Boot Camp still seemed worse in his head than this place.

Shephard had to duck his head down to get under the rock face hatch, putting a pointless arm on it as he did so. The door, thank Christ, had a simple two buttoned control panel. He pushed the green button, and the door opened. Inside, an elevator platform took him up barely four feet to a metal door above him. It slid open without protest, and Shephard stepped through into the pure white light of the room beyond, enjoying the light blues of the walls and shining greys of the tables. Dark and grimy could only be dealt with for so long before you got tired of squinting.

Inside some glass observation cubicles, Shephard saw several of the creatures he had come across, and in some just rocks with moss on them. Although, Shephard was sure it was very special moss. These scientists wouldn't waste their time with just *anything,* no. But something *did* catch Shephard's eye in the next room.

Three tubes of water stood against the wall, complicated control panels beneath them flashing and bleeping as their maintained the thin, long green monstrosity inside. The third tube had smashed, spilling water and one of the creatures across the floor in front of him. Curiously, Shephard edged towards it. It didn't seem to be making any aggressive moves as the electro… thing had, so that was good. Cautiously, he picked it up. It was about as big as a rocket launcher, and just as heavy. The lime green of the creature reflected the pure light of the labs with a glint that made him wince a little.

The mouth at one end of the creature, combined the handle like spines that protruded from near the 'head', convinced Shephard that this was a weapon of some kind, however unclear the instructions might have been. With his newfound (he hoped) weapon mounted on his shoulder, Shephard moved forward, entering another room that went off to the right.

On the right-hand wall, two windows looked down into a tall red room. He could see some reddish coloured creatures stuck to the ceiling, roughly the size of a barrel, with what looked like along, silvery rope dangling from it. A red button in front of him stood before a lens in the control panel pointing upwards. Not seeing the harm in activating a lens, Shephard pushed it. The lens flickered to life, and so did a holographic image of a scientist in front of him. Shephard brought his weapon to bear, but quickly calmed and allowed it to lower. The scientist, one of the few Shephard had seen with a full head of hair, scratched his salt-and-pepper curls as he looked down at a clipboard.

" *Ah yes, Walter… we* were *finally able to successfully detach one of the Barnacle creatures from its' point of gestation."* Shephard glanced past the flickering hologram and into the room. Those things hanging from the roof would be 'Barnacles', then. The scientist continued, oblivious to Shephard.

" *As before, we were still only able to caress the creature into latching on to organic materials."* The scientist looked down at his clipboard again, scowling. *"Unfortunately, the Administrator has called me down to the Anomalous Materials lab this morning for an* important *experiment,"* - his tone seemed to indicate just how important he thought the experiment was - *"so I don't have any time to further my analysis. Take specimen number Eleven Seventy Six and log anything else you can find."*

The hologram deactivated itself, and a door on the other side of the room slid open, allowing Shephard into a dim, crimson lit room. With a cautionary glance back at where the hologram had been, Shephard went inside. Lined up with three on each side, display

booths with various different specimens sat, proudly lighting their captives for any scientist - or visiting soldier - to see.

In the last booth, Shephard saw the number '11 76' flickering on the digital display beneath. Inside, one of the pillow sized creatures sat inside, the mouth end squirming nauseatingly. His nose wrinkled in a disgusted scowl, Shephard reached down and picked it up by the other end, finding a convenient hole to place his hand inside. Surprisingly, it wasn't as warm or sticky as he had been expecting. In fact, it felt almost militaristic inside. Frowning, Shephard turned the creature round and inspected the hole.

He shook his head.

"Scientists…"

They had replaced the innards of the rear of the creature with metal and leather, making it resemble a weapon more than ever. Inside, Shephard found a handle not unlike the one on the Displacer. The similarity made Shephard wonder about just how separate these sectors of the facility were.

Shaking the thought from his head, Shephard moved on, Barnacle hanging from his left hand while propping up the alien rocket launcher on his shoulder with his right. Through the next door, Shephard found a lift that took him to the red room he had observed from above. Slowly, he edged his way through the maze of still tongues, and tried not to spasm instinctively when he felt the tongues flickering against his arm or leg.

He made it to the other door, and went through. After passing through two more lab rooms, Shephard came to a broken walkway crossing a chasm he had no desire to fall down. It wouldn't kill him, but it sure as hell would take his PCV suit a long time to heal. And the idea of sitting around and being alone with his thoughts was not something he relished. The gap was far too big to jump. He frowned as he looked around.

The room was lit green, although it wasn't coming from any light bulb. Taking in the room, he saw strange red growths dotted all around the room, green blobs growing out of the middle of the growths. It looked like the walls had radioactive zits. He walked to one, curiously running a hand down it. His Geiger counter wasn't blaring, so the green stuff wasn't radioactive. It felt spongy but not too pliable, like a stress ball or eraser.

The long green creature on his shoulder made a noise and strained to reach the green blobs with its' mouth. With a shrug, Shephard allowed the creature to reach the green blob, and watched in amazement as it swallowed it hole. The odd thing (comparatively speaking, of course) was that it didn't seem to swallow. It just seemed to store thing down its' gullet for some later use. Then Shephard recognised the green blobs. They were grenades, like the one the electricity alien had thrown at him earlier. He let the creature feast on all the blobs they could reach.

As his pet weapon dined, Shephard noticed there were more of the green blobs on the other side of the walkway. He looked down at the Barnacle.

"Organic materials…" he quoted, remembering the scientist hologram.

He waited for the green creature to finish with a loud, squelchy gulp before aiming the Barnacle in the correct direction. He felt around for a button in the redesigned interior, and eventually felt a lever that seemed to depress into the handle about as wide as the handle itself, like the brakes on a motorcycle. Shephard aimed the creature more precisely at a blob on the other side, and squeezed the 'brakes'.

With a slurp, a thick grey tendril shot out across the room, latching onto the blob without delay. Before Shephard could even smile, the creature had yanked him off his feet and pulled him off his side of the walkway. He fell down into the chasm with a yelp, holding on with his single hand for dear life. The creature held steadfast against the

weight holding it down, and pulled him all the way up the other side and onto the walkway.

Shephard looked impressed at the creature as it tried to eat the green blob. Eventually finding it distasteful, it spit out the green goop with a barely disguised 'Bleah' noise.

With a smile he felt was becoming far too rare these days, Shephard continued on through the next door.

The huge zombie that charged through the crates in the next room made Shephard stumble awkwardly onto his rear. He brought the green shoulder creature down and aimed it straight into the super-zombie's stomach mouth. And that was when he realised he didn't know how to fire the damn thing. Panicking, he squeezed and pulled everything he could until he pulled a spine on the right-hand side of the creature. The zombie exploded in a sea of green, drenching Shephard from head to toe. At that moment he couldn't have been happier to be wearing a gas mask. Because he didn't want to know who exploded zombie mixed with alien grenade tasted like.

The green creature purred satisfactorily, and Shephard gave it what he felt was a well deserved pat on the head before resting his head back and simply lying on the ground.

Corporal Adrian Shephard. Twenty Two years old.

And covered in goo.

With a grunt, he heaved himself to his feet, wiping off whatever he could before scooping up the Barnacle and continuing around the corner and through the next door.

A corridor awaited him looking exactly the same as the habitat observation area he had been in before. But a light source coming from around the bend clued him in somewhat that things may not be *exactly* the same. The he heard that low, rib-shaking wail that filled the air and made him wince. Shephard readjusted the creature and

moved forward. A flashing hazard sign sat on the ground in front of him, barely reaching waist height. Although it wouldn't stop anyone, its' yellow and black striped meaning was clear: under construction.

Although that was fairly obvious from the fact that the corridor was *missing* after the barrier. Shephard poked his head around, looking out into the habitat beyond. It was far larger than the one he had been in earlier, both in height and width. It was quite a sight.

And so were the two giant green snake things that rose out of two holes in the ground. A single thin red eye sat wedged above a long black beak. Yeah, the beak that could crush him in an instant had his attention somewhat. One was much closer to him than the other, and was actually the only one that could reach him. The other was at the far corner of the room. He looked down the pathway that would have someday been encased in walls and a ceiling to make a corridor. At the far end (which really was quite far when there was a giant monster next to you), Shephard could see another piece of corridor mirroring the one in which he stood.

Shephard looked to the tunnel and then to the monster, which had its' back to him. With a shrug, he just ran for it. The tentacle monster whipped around at the sound of his first footstep. Shephard turned in mid-run with his 'rocket launcher' and fired in the creature's face as it brought its' beak down on him. The alien grenade exploded messily against the monsters' face, and it quickly retracted. It shook its' head in an almost spasm motion, like a dog sneezing.

By the time it had recovered itself, Shephard was to far out of its' range. He pointlessly dove over the barrier there and rolled to a stop, the over-reacting gesture making him feel safer nonetheless.

With a deep breath released, Shephard continued on down the corridor. Only to come across a locked door. He considered backing up and blowing it with his newfound 'ultimate weapon', but thought against it. It would probably just make a mess, and since he was still dripping in a substance he never wanted to think about, a mess was something he didn't really want.

So, feeling a little dejected, Shephard walked back to the habitat and stepped outside, knowing he was well out of the creature's range. That didn't stop it from glaring across the room at him, however. Shephard was tempted to make some sort of rude gesture at it to make himself feel better. Instead, he looked around the habitat for an alternative exit.

Eventually, his eyes fell on the tentacle monster in the corner, his gaze wandering up above its' head. The wall had somehow broken at that point, leaving quite a sizeable gap. Inside, Shephard could see an air duct, the side broken and the resulting hole big enough for a person to slip inside. And, as though a sign from heaven, some of the green blobs that the Barnacle so enjoyed latching onto were spread randomly around the rocky walls inside.

Shephard pulled out the Barnacle, aimed, and fired. It took only a few seconds for the tongue to whip out wetly, yanking Shephard from his feet and over the clueless tentacle creature's head. He let the Barnacle detach itself from the obviously bitter green glob and dropped to the floor of the vent. Inside, a dead soldier stared up past him, mouth slightly agape. Whatever it was that had attacked him, he had obviously seen it coming. And been more than a little confused.

After closing the soldiers' eyes and offering a silent prayer (he wasn't religious, but it seemed like the right thing to do), Shephard crawled over the body and through the noisy metal of the air vent.

The vent cover at the end of the twisting maze didn't cause much trouble for the business end of his boot, and Shephard stepped out into a large maintenance room. He was stood on a walkway that ran along the left half of the room, overlooking the right. In the wall above the walkway opposite, a huge ventilation fan whirred away, the vent cover looking more fragile than the one Shephard had just kicked down. At the midway point on the wall beside him, the walkway had collapsed, a dead soldier beneath the fallen metal. It wasn't far down, so Shephard just let himself drop.

On the right side of the room, some barrels and crates were interspersed with medical supplies and ammo. It was shame he wasn't carrying anything that needed ammo, aside from his holstered Desert Eagle. And the ammo for that was becoming so rare, it might as well have been one of the creatures he was holding, or the Displacer dangling down by his hip.

An army radio sat on a green metal crate tempted Shephard for a moment, but then he reconsidered it. Black Ops were most likely listening to all of their standard frequencies. It wasn't worth the risk simply to comfort himself that there were in fact soldiers like him out there. Although after what he had seen soldiers do today… he wasn't sure if he would be comforted by their presence.

The radio crackled to life, regardless of his ambivalence.

" *X Ray Zulu, are you there? We need backup in Waste Sector!"* Gunfire roared in the background, followed by a scream.Then Shephard heard the most shrill wail he had ever experienced. It sounded like a huge eagle. *"Some sort of… worm creature! Tower and Eddie are down and I've lost contact with the rest of the squad! We need backup now! Now, dammit, n-!"*

And with that, the radio went dead. Shephard looked around, searching for signs that would lead him to the 'WASTE SECTOR'. All he could see was the fan. The door leading into the area was blocked by the fallen walkway, and he was damn sure he wouldn't be able to move it by himself. He climbed up a ladder beside the walkway and to the fan. With delicate movements, he placed the Barnacle and 'rocket launcher' down on the floor before lacing his fingers between the gaps on the vent cover. Then, with a firm tug, he brought the large sheet of lattice-work metal from the frame.

All that was left was the incredibly breeze being sucked towards the fan and being blown into the vents ahead. Shephard slipped out his wrench and tossed it into the fan. With some sparks, it flew straight out again, tossing itself across the room so fast that it would have torn through Shephard had he been standing a little to his left. He

picked up his Barnacle and rocket launcher before sliding down the ladder. Needing to get his wrench anyway, Shephard moved to the far end of the room, turned, and aimed the rocket launcher.

He fired two explosive globs at the fan, the second breaking one of the blades. But Shephard was aiming for the rotor. With the third blob, he managed to blast the fan from its' hinges, knocking it back down the vent. With a satisfied nod, he picked up the fallen wrench and made his way back to the vent.

The fan had fallen back at such an awkward angle, Shephard had to toss his weapons through the tiny gaps available before he could squeeze through. Blackness awaited him in the surprisingly spacious vent beyond. He switched on his night vision goggles. Still nothing.

With a grumble concerning 'shoddy workmanship', Shephard continued cautiously into the blackness. He bumped into a few corners before he slipped onto his back, and didn't stop sliding. Wind rushed past Shephard's face, carrying the scent of sewage with it.

Shephard sighed. Sewage. Things were looking up.

(A/N: Well, as much as I don't particularly enjoy Xen in the game, I hope I did enough justice for you Xen fans (all three of you :P). If I didn't, I included 'Vicarious Reality' as well, as a sort of 'begging for forgiveness' package. So everybody's happy!

Anyway, reviewing time!

Next Chapter: Pit Worm's Nest)

Pit Worm's Nest

-1Disclaimer: I don't own *Half-Life.*

(A/N: Many thanks to hhgbh for wonderful, superb, fantastical beta work)

The Black Mesa Incident

Chapter Thirty One: Pit Worm's Nest

Light raced up towards Shephard through a vent cover, and the smell intensified. Shephard crashed through the metal boots first, flying through the air before landing on a wet cushion of crap, shit and whatever the hell that smell was. On the bright side, it seemed to wash away the coat of green slime.

Shephard go to his feet slowly, holding on to a floating crate beside him for leverage. The Barnacle and alien rocket launcher hadn't flown very far from his grip, and it took him little time to scoop them up. He checked the Displacer, afraid that it might blow up from all the different liquids he had been surrounding it with recently. It wasn't beeping or smoking, so Shephard took that as a good sign.

He was in a trash compactor, the kind of room he didn't think existed outside of science fiction movies. The rusted metal of the walls seeped into the yellowy water, giving the edge of the liquid a powdery quality. The only door out of the room looked very much locked, the red lights glimmering above it indicating something that was sealed *very* tight.

Then, with an affirmative beep, the door slid up, allowing him entrance into the dark, grey corridor beyond. A frown creasing his brow, Shephard looked around the room, looking for some kind of trigger he had released. Eventually, his gaze travelled upwards to a window looking into a booth. Inside, the man in the suit, that

Government Man, stood looking down on him, his expression unreadable from such a distance.

A second later, the G-Man turned and walked away.

Shephard launched into a sprint, heading for the corridor. A pool of radioactive liquid on his left didn't even slow him down; he just leapt straight over it. The room beyond was rather minute width and length wise, but was incredibly tall. A red ladder against the wall led up to a floor literally stories above. Shephard leapt onto the ladder without pause, going three rungs at a time up to the next level.

He reached the top and vaulted over, going through an open doorway into a smaller room. Wire mesh covered a viewport looking out into a chamber beyond. Something large moved inside, but Shephard couldn't make out what it was. Not that he was taking much time to inspect such things. He just wanted that G-Man and his smirking face right in front of him. Not even a nasal plea from behind him made him slow down.

The door beside the viewport slid open as he reached it.

The giant worm creature on the other side, however, *did* make him slow down - to a halt, in fact. Shephard stood on a walkway overlooking a pit of sewer water, much like the stuff he had just bathed in. Off to the left, a platform stood with a crank poking out of a control panel there. On the right, a platform with a lever. Directly in front of him, a control panel with the words 'BRIDGE CONTROL'. Underneath, in rather large red letters, the word 'OBSTRUCTION' flickered angrily.

Shephard looked to the creature awaiting him. No shit, obstruction.

The thing looked like a giant, upright caterpillar, with no mouth so speak of and only singular, large green eye that stared right back at him. Two large arms had long black claws at the end of each, with smaller, more insect like arms running along the main body of the creature.

Shephard took a step forward, and the creature howled, throwing its' eye to the heavens in outrage before whipping it back down to look at him. A brilliant green light blasted out of the blackened iris of the creature. Shephard threw himself back against the door, and wilfully let himself fall through it as it opened. He rolled to the side as soon as he hit the ground, the green blast firing through the doorway until the door itself lowered, blocking the glowing energy.

He stared up at the ceiling for a few moments, just *knowing* that the G-Man was gone by now. And, also, that he had no idea how to beat that damn thing. A head put itself in his line of sight, the dim light bulb behind it putting the person in silhouette. All Shephard could make out was some wild, unruly hair.

"I told you to wait, but you wouldn't listen."

The man put out a hand, and Shephard took it, the novelty of someone helping him up refreshing.

"What is that thing?" Shephard asked breathlessly, nodding to the doorway.

The scientist managed a shrug. Shephard could make out his wrinkly, tired face much better now. He looked like he had been through hell *before* this mess started. "It's Race X, whatever it is."

"Do you know how to kill it?"

"Well, at least you have the intelligence to ask. Another group of soldiers were here a few moments ago and they simply went in with all guns blazing."

"Where are they now?"

Scratching his head, the scientist looked to the door. "In pieces through there, I expect. But anyway," he said, brushing aside the subject as though it were a mere inconvenience, "you want to know how to beat it, correct?"

Shephard nodded getting more impatient. He noticed the Displacer dangling by his side.

"This entire complex is a waste disposal centre. You *should* be able to flood the chamber with radioactive waste if you follow my instructions. Understood?"

He wasn't really listening, but Shephard nodded regardless, his eyes still set on the Displacer.

"Now, you'll need to go down to the lower levels and activate both the Valve and Gearbox mechanisms. Once those are in place you'll need to turn the crank that activates the primary pump, while also finding some way to get to the platform with the lever for- what are you doing?"

Halfway through the speech, Shephard had started carefully placing his weapons on the floor. Once the wrench was down, Shephard pointed to the display on the floor.

"Don't touch them."

The scientist shook his head vehemently.

"But… what are you going to do?"

Shephard removed the Displacer from his shoulder and put it in front of him, checking it for damage.

"Well, sorry, but… I'm sure as hell not doing all that crap."

"But-"

"Stand back. I don't know how big this reaction will be."

" *What* reaction?!" the scientist yelled, exasperated. "What is that? What are you going to do?!"

Shephard turned and walked to the door. It slid open compliantly, revealing the beast beyond. He took a few steps back, cricked his neck, and launched forward in a sprint. The worm creature howled as he reached the guardrail of the walkway and used it as a springboard, thrusting himself right at the creature.

He pressed the red button on the Displacer, and it hummed to life, the front opening up as it had done for both him and for Magnusson. Shephard hoped it wouldn't send this thing to the same place Magnusson went.

As he reached the creature, Shephard plunged it into the eye, spurting yellow blood in all directions, including all over Shephard. Turning his head away, Shephard saw a walkway down below that was just above water level. As the worm thrashed in agony, it brought Shephard down near the walkway. He released his grip from the Displacer and leapt off, hitting the walkway in roll that took him into the next room.

He hit the wall back first, his helmet slamming against it with a metallic thud that reverberated around the back of his head. The creature continued to wail outside, noisily thrashing against everything it could reach.

A green flash from outside brought Shephard's attention away from the stinging sensation in the back of his head.

Silence descended, the only noise that of the sewage water swishing around. Shephard got to his feet and went outside, his boots echoing noisily against the metal walkway in the now empty chamber. It was a wonderful feeling, that sudden sense of peace.

Shephard turned to see a ladder leading back up to the platform he had leapt from, and climbed up. The scientist was there waiting for him, standing by the bridge control panel.

"That… that…" he looked at Shephard, wide eyed. "What *was* that?"

"The Displacer," he replied matter-of-factly, turning to the control panel and pressing the only button there. In front of him on the other side of the chamber, a bridge began to extend from a doorway that had been hidden by the worm creature.

He walked back inside and picked up his weapon, noticing that the Desert Eagle was missing. Thinking back, he didn't actually remember taking it out before going outside for his face-off. He grimaced, a little annoyed at his on ineptitude. It probably fell out of the holster and into the water. The weight of the alien rocket launcher on his shoulder comforted him somewhat.

Ah, well. It had been out of ammo anyway.

The scientist had followed him in, watching with abject astonishment as Shephard loaded up.

"How do I get to the observation booth of that trash compactor there?"

"The waste management device, you mean?"

Shephard glared at him. "Whatever."

"That one?" he said, pointing to the door Shephard had first used to come in.

"Yes," he hissed.

"You can't. It's been blocked off by fallen debris. One of my colleagues was heading there earlier today, in fact, when…" He cleared his throat. "Well, never mind."

Shephard studied the scientist for a moment. "Do you want to come?"

"What? Oh, good God, no. Even before that thing arrived, there was a terrible amount of gunfire and explosions coming from up there. My chances of survival up there are negligible at best."

"I'll be there to help you."

"I'll just be a hindrance, and you know it. Go, go."

Somewhat unnerved by the nonchalant manner in which the scientist had resigned himself to his own death, Shephard just nodded dumbly and walked back through the door, heading over the now completed bridge.

"Good luck," they said to each other in sync.

It prompted a smile from both of them. Shephard offered the slightest of nods, the Barnacle and alien rocket launcher taking his hands preventing him from waving. The scientist returned the gesture and walked back into the small room, the door sliding shut behind him.

With a shake of the head, Shephard walked across the bridge and into the corridor beyond. A door off to the left awaited him, the control lever beside it sparking and sputtering.

He sighed. Damn scientists and their damned top secret research facilities.

(A/N: Please turn over for another chapter.

Next Chapter: Gonarch's Lair)

Gonarch's Lair

-1Disclaimer: I don't own *Half-Life.*

(A/N: Repeated thanks to hhgbh for beta work!)

The Black Mesa Incident

Chapter Thirty Two: Gonarch's Lair

Gordon stepped silently out of the flashing maelstrom and onto moist, solid land. This island was far bigger than the one he had just been inside. A cave stood in the distance, a yellow-blue light glowing from inside luring any passer-by towards its' warmth. He looked around. Behind him, the island simply ended, going off into the nothingness around him. The 'sky' was a greenish-grey this time, making everything just that little more dark and shadowy. It didn't bode well, honestly.

Two crab creatures drew his attention in front of him, the pair side by side as they crawled towards him, their long claws raised.

He couldn't help but feel a little amused. If this big bad monster was guiding him through these portals, then surely it would redirect somewhere with a more dangerous threat?

Why did he instantly regret those thoughts?

The right hand crab leapt at his head, and Gordon ducked and whirled around, swinging the butt of the shotgun around with him. He caught the crab as it sailed over him, knocking it across the island and under what looked like a tree. Except instead of leaves or branches, there was just a giant pointed hook making up the tip. As soon as the crab touched it, the hook sliced down, impaling the miniscule alien to the floor.

Gordon made a note not to go near them. The whereabouts of the second crab occurred to him, and he turned around, blasting it back in mid-leap with the shotgun.

He looked down at the little body for a moment before pushing his glasses up his nose and continuing forward to the cave.

A loud, animalistic, primal wail sounded from the cave ahead, making Gordon duck his head with its' sudden volume. A sort of heavy gallop echoed from the cave, making Gordon cock the shotgun and swallow loudly, backing up a few unconscious steps as the noise grew louder.

Then, a mushroom shaped, four legged creature emerged from the cave, stopping at the mouth to look straight at him - if it even had eyes, that is. It was indeed shaped like a mushroom, but with a flat top and a bulging, fleshy sack dangling from the body where the stem would be. The four legs were more like angular, pointed claws, and Gordon doubted they would put the creature in much good stead on dry land. Which was probably why the ground here was so moist.

The crab creature's natural habitat. And this was their mother.

Gordon looked to the green, dull sky, eyebrow cocked.

Touché, big bad alien.

The creature wailed again and charged at him. Gordon unloaded blast after blast from the shotgun on the giant crab creature, the pellets sparking uselessly against the top of its' shell. It moved surprisingly fast for something so large, and managed to reach him in no time, covering the last distance with an impressive leap that rammed straight into him. The impact knocked Gordon across the island and onto his back, the shotgun flying off from his grip and to the side.

Resting on his elbows, Gordon propped himself up and tried to get to his feet. The creature was upon him before he could even straighten

his glasses. It stabbed down claw after claw on his head, and Gordon wormed his way this way and that as he tried to avoid the deadly blades. He tried not to look at how big the holes in the ground were where the claws at hit it.

Teeth clenched, Gordon pulled out the revolver and pressed it to the creature's sack, now bobbing up and down above his belly. Then something small and white dropped from it. Then another. Gordon frowned as five miniature, almost foetus like crab creatures crawled up his arms and chest, each one barely bigger than the palm of his hand. He tried to ignore them and fired into the sack, blowing a hole straight through it.

The monster wailed, backing away from him with surprising speed before turning and heading for the cave. Yellow blood trailed out of the sack beneath it, giving Gordon something to follow. With that worry gone, he grabbed the mini crabs and crushed them in his palms. It was like crumbling prawn crackers.

Now at the mouth of the cave, the creature turned and spurted something out of a hole on the top of its' head. The blob of white liquid flew up into the air before gradually coming back down on him. Gordon rolled away and heard it splatter against the ground where his head had been, the acid fizzling away until it had melted a sizeable hole into the ground.

So it could spit acid, and it could make irritating little crab things. How nice. One of the little creatures bit the back of his neck, and he ripped it off him with a pained hiss. He crushed the creature under his HEV boot.

Irritating, and they stung.

Gordon looked up at the cave. The creature had gone, and the galloping was getting quieter. He collected his shotgun and followed, using the Long Jump to skip considerable parts of his journey. Inside the cave, he saw yellow crystals exactly like the ones he had

experimented on back at Anomalous Materials. Amazing how everything came full circle sometimes.

The cave bent off to the right, coming out at a small open area before another cave on the right. Gordon reached the exit of his cave as he saw the shadow figure of the creature disappear into the entrance of the other. Minding the hole in the ground that was covered by nothing more than web, Gordon leapt after it.

He quickly caught up with it in the increasingly dark cave, flicking his flashlight on when it became impossible to see anything. The unmistakable shape of the crab mother waddled away in the front of him. Thanks to the Long Jump, he was well and truly catching up with the creature now. With one final jump, he leapt at the wall just beside the creature, using it a kick off point to get onto the monster's flat top.

Almost instantly sliding off, he managed to get a grip on the very edge of the top of the creature. As he clung to it, he prayed that his host didn't decide to spray acid on him. Because as strong as his opticians had said his glasses were, he didn't remember them saying anything about alien mother monster acid.

It became a redundant worry as he suddenly felt a sensation of weightlessness, and realised that the crab mother had leapt off a ledge. Gordon let go of the creature as it tumbled, having no desire to be caught underneath it when it landed… *whenever* it landed.

Then they *both* hit the ground, the creature sliding down the incredibly slippery ground beneath them. Gordon could see the entrance to a chamber in front of them, the yellowy-green of the walls putting the creature in silhouette. The monster managed to keep itself still on the slope with its' claws, waiting for him halfway down the slope. Gordon didn't really have the luxury of claws, and he doubted even the crowbar would be much use in the thick mud beneath him.

So he pulled out a grenade as he slid towards the creature, pulling out the pin with his teeth as he slipped underneath the sack. With a loud grunt, he shoved the grenade up into the hole in the sack that the mini-crabs had come from. When he reached the ledge, he plunged the shotgun into the mud, hoping it would give him some leverage to stay while he figured out a way of getting down.

The bright walls were too slippery to climb down, but there was a web halfway down the cylindrical chamber which would allow him to get down to the ground below without much trouble. Resolved, Gordon started to pull the shotgun out.

And then the grenade exploded. The crab mother let out a magnificent, dying wail as it stumbled about in the tight confines of the tunnel it stood in. After colliding with the walls a few times, it collapsed to the ground and started sliding towards him. Gordon managed to pull his shotgun free and leapt for the web just as the tank size monster flew over his head. They landed on the light, sticky material at the same time, the creature's weight having significantly more effect than Gordon's.

It tore instantly through the web with a resounding rip noise, plunging them both to the ground just a few feet below. But the creature didn't stop there, instead ploughing through the ground and down below. Gordon landed just next to the hole it had created, the ground beside it breaking away as he hit it.

All Gordon could see was a bright blue light beneath him, and as he fell into it, he saw the familiar flashing of another portal consuming him.

If this 'single powerful being' wasn't careful, this teleporting thing could get *really* old, *really* fast.

(A/N: Hope there weren't any fans of 'Pit Worm's Nest' who desperately wanted to see it in written form; as soon as the idea of

Shephard using the Displacer popped into my head, there was little I could do to shake it.

Anyway, this is the last of the double chapters; from here on out its' singular instalments all the way. As most of you know, things will get just that little bit more epic from this point on.

So, review!

Next Chapter: Foxtrot Uniform)

Foxtrot Uniform

Disclaimer: I don't own *Half-Life.*

(A/N: Many thanks to hhgbh for beta work. Not just for this chapter, but for a huge amount of stories I've sent your way and you've made just that extra bit better with your advice. Have a good time on your travels, man. From all the spare time you've devoted to my sometimes less than coherent scribblings, you've definitely earned it. J Thanks again.)

The Black Mesa Incident

Chapter Thirty Three: Foxtrot Uniform

Much to Shephard's pleasant surprise, the sparking lever opened the door beside it without a fuss, allowing him through into the dark, dank area beyond. The walkway on which he now stood overlooked a pool of murky water just a few inches below it. The rusted brown metal of the tunnel didn't really help with the visual side of things. With a quick tap on his gasmask, he activated his IR lenses and continued on, following the walkway forward and then off to the left into a small corridor.

There were no doors on either side, just crates. A quick glance upwards gave Shephard his way out, however. The ceiling of the corridor stretched out far above him, and allowing him a view of a metal walkway overlooking the corridor. Several of the green 'zits' grew out of the wall beside the walkway, and Shephard pulled himself up with the Barnacle without incident.

Without incident, that is, until he reached the top, at which point the Barnacle refused to detach from the green plant. Shephard tugged at it a few times, propping his leg up on the wall and giving it a severe yank when it stubbornly held on. But, to no avail. For whatever reason, the Barnacle was determined to stay.

Scowling at being beaten by living harpoon gun, Shephard looked around. A red ladder in the middle of the walkway extended up through a tunnel in the ceiling. Sunlight shone down like some ethereal saviour, leaving Shephard only too happy to abandon the Barnacle to whatever attractive feast it had found. He flipped off his IR lenses before continuing on. If there was to be sunlight beating down on him, he wanted to see it properly.

Alien grenade launcher in one hand, he climbed the ladder with the other, the pink clouds of the sky turning the weapon a paler shade of green as he ascended. Shephard climbed out of the hatch and up into the open air after what had felt like a lifetime of confined spaces and alien territory. Never had a concrete road looked so beautiful, and he had to kneel and run his fingertips over the surface to assure himself he was really there.

The road ran along in front of him before bending off to the left. A metal door filled the archway behind him, and an intimidating rock face on his left prevented him from seeing what awaited him around the corner. The pale grey wall on his right was littered with large shipment containers. A parked military green van sat in front of him, although it had long since been vacated by any soldiers.

Everything looked abandoned, in fact. The scorched roads, the worn containers… it was like the whole place was simply fading away. The sun was setting on the Black Mesa Facility.

Shephard started walking down the road when the sound of another van approaching echoed quietly down to him. From around the corner, a black van mirroring the one that sat beside him came to a halt. A Black Ops soldier hopped out of the back, and as Shephard instinctively took aim with his alien death machine, another leapt out. Shephard aimed for the cab of the van, hoping he would hit the engine.

He fired.

And the engine exploded in a brilliant combination of luminescent green and angry yellow, the grey mushroom billowing upwards gracefully. The explosion engulfed one Black Ops and threw the other out of sight around the corner, although Shephard had little doubt that he was dead. Even with a PCV, being that close to an explosion would rip a man's head clean off.

With a sudden admiration for alien technology, Shephard made his way around the corner. Three high powered bullets hit him in the chest within a second, punching the oxygen from his lungs and knocking him onto his back. With a grunt, Shephard rolled back to safety, listening as dozens of bullets thumped against the rock face.

Shephard didn't give himself the time to catch his breath, since he knew the enemy wouldn't. Still panting, Shephard slowly poked his head around the corner. One glance was all he needed before a shower of bullets rained down on him and he tucked himself back behind cover. Three crates full of explosives (marked by triangular orange symbol) were sat behind the mounted machinegun his enemies were using. Hoping his memory was as good as he thought it was, Shephard edged the launcher around the corner, the creature squirming in his arms as though fully aware of the danger. Pointing it in the right direction, he fired.

With a wet launching noise, the creature recoiled in his hands, the awkward angle at which he held it almost ejecting it from his hands. A few seconds later, he heard the explosion and saw the flash on the road in front of him. He stood with his back pressed to the wall for a few moments more, listening to the crackle of the fire and for any other dangers.

Still not satisfied, Shephard whirled around the corner. Nothing. Just some human shaped scorch marks in the far corner of the road where the Black Ops had been burnt into the wall. He continued on, strafing against the rock face with his launcher firmly aimed at the fire.

A stack of containers blocked a canyon coming up on his left, but a fallen container with a shattered door offered Shephard a way through. After a few more steps, he was through and walking up the dark tunnel. At the top of the container a hole had been blasted in the left-hand side, leading out into the sandy arena beyond. Shephard poked his head around cautiously. His eye instantly went to the Black Ops in the watchtower growing out of the wall on his right.

They both drew on each other at the same time, but Shephard managed to squeeze of a green, liquid-y shot before his enemy could retaliate in kind. It exploded in the watchtower with a distant pop, and Shephard looked around. Green liquid was splattered over the frame of the watchtower and the ceiling, dripping down to the unseen floor high above him. The ground below looked sandy and soft, so Shephard just let himself fall down into the confined little canyon beyond.

Shephard's eye was drawn to a gap in the ground beneath the wall on his right, in the very far corner. It looked akin to how a dog would dig beneath a garden fence. There was just enough room for him to squeeze through by pushing the alien launcher through first, although the constant squirming and writhing of his erstwhile companion didn't make it particularly easy.

From what Shephard could see, the hole led into a small storage area of a room, judging by the sparse metal shelves and wooden crates dotted around randomly. Just as Shephard pushed the creature through, the explosive noise of gunfire coming from the room made Shephard quickly back up, forcing him to leave the creature. It let out a pained cry as it was torn to shreds by the bullets. Shephard held out a futile hand towards it, the pathetic noise it made somehow pulling some amount of sympathy from him. After all, the thing had been keeping him alive for some time now.

"Fucking aliens," a low voice muttered, and Shephard watched as two grey, well worn boots clomped into view, tentatively poking the

dead creature with a toe. Shephard recognised the white and green camo of the uniform and smiled.

"Hey there."

The idle boots instantly froze, and the soldier ducked down, rifle at the ready. He paused as he saw Shephard, and then broke out in a relieved grin, greying brown beard wrinkling on his face.

"Hey man, good to see you." He backed up and waved Shephard in. As he crawled through the hole, the soldier kept on talking with a groan. "I can't believe you made it past those masked *freaks* ."

Another voice from his right started talking, sounding rather aggravated and more than a little jumpy.

"Those snipers have pinned us down in here pretty good. We tried makin' a break for it, but they know we're here. They're just waitin' for their shots. And those bastards are *patient* ."

Shephard got to his feet and dusted himself off, realising what a futile gesture it was when he saw that his hands were caked in dust themselves.

The bearded soldier nodded in agreement with his fellow soldier. "Yeah, I'd love to turn the tables on those guys. Get my hands on one of those rifles; show them a thing or two about patience."

His comrade stepped forward, removing his black beret to scratch his short cropped black hair. "Hey, with you here now we have the element of surprise on our side. They're not expecting *three* of us."

The two soldiers stared at him hopefully. Shephard simply nodded, prompting eager grins from the pair, who instantly ran to the open doorway on the right and took up positions on either side. Still feeling bruised where the mounted machinegun bullets had hit his chest, Shephard walked over slowly. The beret wearing soldier backed up to allow him a view out. Shephard considered asking them their

names, but he stopped himself. If he didn't know their names, then he couldn't mourn them like real people. He couldn't feel their deaths weighing down on him.

Fully aware of how full of shit he was, Shephard looked out the doorway, being sure not to expose himself.

Some stacked containers blocked his view immediately ahead. There was a big enough gap between the doorway and the containers for a rather wide 'corridor', however, leading around to both sides. They were in some sort of courtyard. Looking around to the right, Shephard spotted a black form crumpled on the floor, and on further inspection, it turned out to be a Black Ops soldier, green slime spread of his back.

He looked up and smiled. It was the same watchtower he had blasted with his alien rocket launcher. The guy probably had no idea what hit him. The body was just past the edge of the container, and Shephard was fairly sure another sniper would be waiting for him. The sniper rifle lying limply in the soldier's arms drew Shephard's attention, and he looked to the bearded soldier opposite him.

"Cover me."

Looking confused, the soldier nodded anyway, and, after plucking one of the grenades from Beard's PCV vest, Shephard carefully moved out into the open, keeping his head down. When he reached the corner of the container, he pulled the pin and tossed the grenade around.

He waited until the resounding bang and flash of the explosion before darting out to the sniper rifle and quickly scooping it up. As he picked up the rifle and backed up to get to cover, he noticed the recognisable silhouette of another watchtower through the billowing grey cloud. Shephard pressed his back to the container. Beard and Beret were making a move to come out, but Shephard halted them with a raise of his palm.

He took a few moments to catch his breath and try to ignore the pain in his chest before whirling around the corner, sniper rifle touching the edge of the container as he tried to stay as much behind cover as he could. The figure of the Black Ops was easy enough to make out, and Shephard took him out with one shot as his enemy's bullet grazed his shoulder and lodged itself in the wall behind him.

Shephard grunted and put himself back behind cover, dropping the sniper rifle and putting a tentative hand over the wound. Beard and Beret quickly joined him.

"That's one down," Beret breathlessly enthused. He was definitely the younger of the two.

"One? You mean there's more?"

Beard shook his head. "Only one sniper, but there are more Black Ops around for sure."

Shephard nodded while checking his wound. The PCV had managed to stop the bleeding, but the scar was still fairly raw. He would have to be gentle with it for a little bit. He picked up the sniper rifle and checked through the scope as he spoke. "I suppose we'd better get moving, then."

More Black Ops awaited them through the maze of a courtyard, various warehouses, containers and stacks of crates providing them with ample cover. But Shephard's sniper training certainly paid off, and the soldiers soon had precisely aimed high powered bullets blasting through them, frequently knocking them rolling backwards from the force of the shot.

As they made their way through, Shephard couldn't help but notice the explosive laser mines that had been placed down certain alleyways and passages, usually linked to explosive crates and barrels to deter anyone. He was curious as to what they could be guarding, but the knowledge that they were in what once used to be

a missile silo got Shephard thinking that a huge chain of explosions probably wouldn't benefit anyone.

After half a dozen or so Black Ops tried without success to take them down - the closest they got was a bullet grazing Beard's thigh - they reached a warehouse entrance that wasn't sealed tight, instead appearing as though it had been forced open. Shephard instantly slowed and waved a hand for his comrades to do the same.

"Do they look like claw marks to you guys, too?" Beret asked, his gaze firmly set on the red metal door.

"What would you rather fight against?" Beard responded.

"Good point."

Shephard nodded to the dented entrance. "Let's go."

The lights had gone out inside, the wall of containers in front of them not exactly making it any easier.

"Can you two see me?"

Beard grunted. "Barely."

"Then just follow me." Shephard flicked on his IR lenses and led the way, navigating his way through the maze on guesswork rather than any natural sense of direction.

Machinegun fire instantly pressed their backs to the wall, but after only a few seconds it became obvious that whoever it was wasn't firing at them. In fact, they weren't even in their immediate area. The light was getting better as they approached a corner of the nearest container, so Shephard switched off his IR lenses and gave a wave to his comrades to stop behind him.

"What's goin' on?" Beard asked, doing his best to try and see around Shephard.

Slowly, the Corporal edged his head around the corner. Inside was a loading area, with two raised platforms on either side with gaps for trucks to be driven into and unloaded. Crates were scattered randomly over the floor and the platforms, indicating some kind of hurried supply check recently. But that wasn't really what attracted Shephard's attention.

What interested him most was the titanic battle occurring before his eyes between the Black Ops and Race X. Shephard's two most deadly enemies, and they were at each others' throats. There was something gratifying about that. He turned back to Beard and Beret.

"Internal politics."

"What?" Dissatisfied with Shephard's deadpan reply, he edged his own head around to see what was going on. He laughed so loud Shephard almost told him to shut up. But the roaring noise of machinegun fire, electricity blasts and random explosions told him to stop being so stupid.

Beard slid down to sit between Shephard and Beret, the latter of whom was still looking rather tense and confused. "So we wait it out, right?"

Shephard nodded, and rested his head back. It would be nice to get some rest. But something in the back of his head urged him to keep an eye on the corner beside him, just in case either of the two sides decided to take cover. As it happened, nothing of the sort occurred, and the three soldiers had a relatively peaceful wait while the gunfire and explosions slowly petered down until there was just one gun, and just one alien. The pair periodically exchanged fire and then silenced themselves in order to take cover and reload. Eventually this pattern disappeared when the Black Ops ran out of ammunition.

A small alien snarl was followed by another electricity blast, and Shephard winced as he heard the thump of the human body against a wall.

He looked over to Beard and Beret, who were now squatting beside him, ready to go. Shephard got to his feet, grasping his sniper rifle, and nodded for them to go in ahead of him. With no less than a cursory glance at one another, they launched themselves around the corner, quickly followed by Shephard who stayed back by the container, quickly surveying the area before training the sniper rifle on the silvery-blue Race X creature. It was kneeling over the dead body of the Black Ops soldiers, although it didn't seem to be taking anything. It just knelt and stared.

It's attention was quickly drawn to Beard and Beret as they opened fire, lodging several bullets in its' back with their M4 rifles before it whipped around, electricity alien at the ready. Shephard took aim at the yellow cat-like eye of the creature and fired. A massive spurt of yellow accompanied the falling creature as it was blown back, turning as it fell and landing on its' front.

While Beard and Beret got to their feet, congratulating each other on a killing well done, Shephard walked to the Race X creature and knelt down beside it, much like the alien itself had been doing some time ago. What had it been doing? All appearances so far had shown that, while they were sentient, these things were vicious killing machines. So why the apparent regret over the death of an enemy? Or maybe it was just curiosity. Shephard could understand that to an extent. But still…

"Watch it!"

The electricity alien's weapon leapt out of him, squealing angrily at the one responsible for its' master's death. Shephard swung the butt of the sniper rifle around, knocking it across the room and to the feet of Beard and Beret, who wasted no time blasting holes through it and into the concrete.

The two blew out a simultaneous breath of relief, looking to Shephard with tired smiles.

"How the hell have you survived this long paying that much attention?" Beard said, making Beret laugh.

"So, uh," Beret asked, scratching the side of his head with the nozzle of his rifle, "where to?"

Shephard got to his feet with a grunt. The pain in his chest hadn't subsided much, and although the bleeding had been stopped in his shoulder, it still stung bitterly. The PCV was running low on power. He looked around the loading bay, and seeing only a thoroughly locked door at the bottom of a ramp at the far end of the room, he couldn't see much of an exit. But a curved shape sticking out of the ground on one of the platforms got his attention, and he made his way quickly past the soldiers, hopping up onto the platform with little effort.

"What?"

He couldn't tell who had asked the question, but it didn't matter. He wasn't really in the mood to explain himself, especially if this turned out to be nothing.

But nothing it most certainly *wasn't*, for between some fallen metal crates, a ladder protruded from a sizeable hole in the ground, leading into the pitch black darkness below. Now behind him, Beard whistled appreciatively. "Now that's dark."

Shephard just nodded quietly before jumping down, landing on the concrete ground with an echoing thud.

"You sure about this?"

He looked up to the two silhouetted heads looking down at him. "I can guide you."

"I-" Beard groaned. "Fine."

The high pitched whine of a falling bomb made all three soldiers look up. And then the warehouse exploded, sending rocks and debris tumbling down through the hole and knocking Shephard back several feet onto his rear. He quickly heaved himself to his feet, futilely swiping at the cloud of dust that had formed.

"Are you okay?" Shephard yelled, flicking on his IR goggles.

A pained groan was all he got.

"Hello? Answer me!"

"We're okay!" He wasn't sure who it was. Beret, maybe. "Managed to avoid the worst of it. But…"

Shephard could see. The entire entrance to the tunnel was blocked off. "I know."

"What should we do?"

"Find some other way out of here."

"Screw that." That was definitely beard. "What about you?"

"I'm fine. I'll make my way through here and, hopefully, I'll meet you somewhere else."

"You're gonna rely on 'hopefully'?"

"'Hopefully' is all I've got."

The silence from the other end was far too long.

"Okay. But I'm gonna hold you to that. Good luck."

Shephard turned and looked down the black tunnel, turned a very alien shade of green by the his IR lenses.

"Thanks."

He gripped the sniper rifle tighter in his gloved hands, and waded into velvety blackness.

Although suddenly alone again, Shephard felt somewhat vindicated in his train of thought that if he didn't learn the names of those he came across, they didn't seem to die. At least, they didn't die as a consequence of his being there. So from now on, he would just dispose of names and label them from any discerning physical attributes.

It made sense to him, anyway.

The sound of light dripping echoed from around the corner. Moss grew in the corners of the wall where it met the curved ceiling. Tendrils of long green seaweed-like flora dangled from the roof, brushing lightly against the gash on his arm. He hissed unconsciously from the stinging sensation, the noise echoing down the tunnel.

And that's when he heard the growl. A slow gallop began from somewhere down the tunnel, punctuated from the occasional pig like grunt. Shephard knew that grunt. It was that purple striped creature that he had fought in the habitat. The thing he remembered most about it was how damn big it was. Oddly, the galloping stopped. Then he was reminded of something else about the creatures.

Purple electricity suddenly lit the tunnel, casting its' villainous hue over the pig like creature as it gathered between its' stumpy claws. It finally considered the blast ready for launch at let it go free, like someone releasing a small bird. Shephard barely had time to launch backwards and flatten himself to the ground before it flashed over him, hitting the wall at the far end of the tunnel with a resounding bang.

He sat up, sniper at the ready. The creature was charging again.

Just giving me a target, freak.

Shephard let his instincts take over. Fire, reload. Fire, reload. Fire-

With a groan, the creature suddenly flopped to the ground, looking unbalanced. Shephard had reloaded, and was about to fire again when the monster exploded in a flash of purple, forcing him to shield his eyes.

For a few minutes, he simply sat where he was, content to listen to his own breathing and for any other creatures that might want to start something with him. All he heard was the dripping of an unseen water pipe. He got to his feet and moved forward, his IR lenses doing little to show him anything more than a few feet in front of him. Right now he would have preferred a flashlight. Or even an old fashioned flame torch. Anything would be better than this green haze he was being forced to survive through.

On top of that, he had no idea how much ammunition he had left. He didn't relish the thought of going against these huge monstrous things with only a wrench and a knife.

He turned a corner, and suddenly found himself in a open area. At least, more open than the confines of the tunnels. Another snort, this one much higher in pitch, came to his ears, and he instantly brought his rifle to bear. The snorting got closer and closer, each one making his grip on the rifle tighten considerably.

Then a miniature version of the tiger-pig creature emerged, barely the height of his knee. Shephard lowered his weapon, blowing out a breath of relief. With a disparaging shake of his head at the slow, small creature, Shephard continued past it, only too aware of how much power his IR goggles had left. Irritated at being dismissed in such a way, the creature sliced out with on of its' stubby, pointed front claws. It cut into the back of his calf, sending him crying out and kneeling to the wet, stinking floor.

Shephard looked back to the creature with a scowl, reaching for his machete and whipping it around at the head. It dislocated on impact, sending the alien whirling around and limply onto its' back. More

snorting instantly began around him, and three more of the slow creatures lumbered out of the darkness. Shephard gripped the wrench and quickly disposed of them, either knocking them back into the pitch blackness they came from or crushing them into the ground with his boot.

Breathing heavily and now limping, Shephard struggled on down a tunnel in front of him. A light source from around the corner gave him hope, and his pace increased considerably despite the pain shooting up his leg. As he went, he saw several small craters in the sewer water at his feet, at the centre of which small, cracked eggs were littered.

I'm in a nest…

Rather than tempt any retribution from another parent, Shephard continued on into the open area around the corner. The light was coming from a grate in the ceiling on the far side of the room. A ladder led up to it, and it couldn't get to Shephard fast enough as he limped over. Finally, he climbed up and stopped at the grate when he saw two sturdy boots standing on top.

"I bet you could get lost in this place real easy."

"We *are* lost, dipshit."

He figured that Black Ops probably didn't talk to each other that much while out in the field, so Shephard went out on a limb and cleared his throat. The soldier standing on the grate looked down on him. His cigarette fell from his lips and sparked against the grate as it fell through and past Shephard's face.

"It's a soldier! Hey, stand back and I'll cut it! We're gonna need your help!"

Shephard did as he was told and slid down the ladder, backing up to give the grate plenty of room to fall. Paranoid, he continually checked around him for anymore pig things while he heard the

engineer blowtorch his way through the metal grate. Finally, the shower of sparks coming down the passageway of light stopped, and with a loud creak and a clang, Shephard assumed the grate was now opened.

He climbed up and into the small storage room above. Two soldiers stood on either side of him. The engineer, already lighting another cigarette with some oddly clean looking matches, looked down at Shephard's nametag.

"A Corporal? Hell, we thought you would have made evac already!"

"Things… didn't go as planned."

The engineer grinned, and although his eyes were hidden by the blackened goggles, Shephard got the feeling it was genuine. The soldier on his left, a medic, clapped a steady hand down on Shephard's shoulder, wringing it for good measure.

"It's good to see you sir. It's a real mess out there. I mean these… *things* are comin' outta the damn walls. Ain't no way around 'em either; they just keep coming!"

Nodding down at the sniper rifle in Shephard's hands, the engineer blew out a leisurely cloud of smoke away from the faces of his comrades. "We may just have enough firepower to push through now. At the very least, we can give it our best shot."

The medic nodded in agreement, his intense blue eyes burning into Shephard's as he spoke. "We heard about some kind of big standoff at the dam up ahead. I say we make our break for it now. It ain't gonna get any better, that's for sure. And I bet they could use our help."

Shephard cocked the sniper rifle. "Sounds like a plan."

Laughing, the engineer slapped him around the back. "I like this guy!"

And with that, the engineer prepared his Desert Eagle, the medic his standard Glock, and they head out of the open doorway in front of them, Shephard leading by instinct more than anything else. The doorway led out into a broken down part of a warehouse. The ceiling was all but gone, lumps of debris scattered all along the ground like inconvenient molehills. On the left, shattered windows and a bare doorway led out into the open. Stacked containers were all Shephard could see under the pinkish light of the setting sun. Two, side by side, had a small gap in-between them.

Inside, Shephard saw movement, and instantly knelt, his eye lens pressed to the scope. An electricity alien darted into view, making a break for the open. The sniper bullet hit it with enough power to blow back head over heels. Engineer whistled appreciatively.

The now familiar sound of alien speech echoed from around the left corner, and Engineer leapt into action, Desert Eagle at the ready.

"Come get some!"

Shephard barely had time to shout a warning before the silvery-blue form of an electricity alien appeared from around the corner, intercepting Engineer before he could even get outside. Undeterred, Engineer shoved the Desert Eagle into the creature's tentacled mouth and fired twice. A third bullet blew through the alien's electricity weapon as it fell. Obviously they had been fighting these aliens for awhile.

A loud, pig-like snort sounded, and both Shephard and Medic ran for the doorway. All three of them headed outside, lining up in a row as they aimed their weapon at the oncoming storm. Without any prompting, they unleashed a simultaneous volley of hot metal hell on the creature, tearing into it with almost no difficulty. With a moan, it tumbled to the ground, and exploded in a purple flash, bits and pieces of the body flying through the air and landing around them with a squelch.

"Holy… crap." Engineer turned to Shephard, grinning inanely. "That's the first time I've seen one of those sons of bitches explode!"

"Never gets old…" Shephard admitted, getting to his feet and leading the way around another tower of containers. Around the right corner, one of the containers was open on both sides, allowing entrance into the alleyway beyond. At the far end, Shephard could see two of the electricity aliens approaching. One pulled out a green blob and tossed it into the air, the considerable muscle behind the throw sending it over the containers and down just beside them.

"Move!" Medic yelled pointlessly as they scattered. The explosion knocked Shephard across the courtyard and into the wall opposite, sliding down before hitting the floor with a solid thud.

One of the aliens made a comment that almost sounded like an insult. Shephard picked up the sniper rifle as Medic and Engineer joined him, weapons at the ready.

Suddenly, Shephard remembered what it was like to be in the army. Between the three of them, they managed to work their way through four of the electricity creatures as they proceeded through the 'corridor' and around the corner, eventually bringing them to a small abandoned warehouse sat in the middle of another courtyard area. Around the right hand side, a black soldier wearing a bandana crouched against the wall, his SAW rifle recognisable even from the distance Shephard found himself at.

His eyes glistened with hope when he noticed them emerging from the corner, and he waved them over quickly, indicating that they should keep their heads down. Keeping an eye out in every direction he could through the scope of the snipe rifle, Shephard took up the rear while Engineer led the way.

"Holy shit, I can't believe anyone else made it," Bandana whispered fiercely through grinning teeth.

Medic leaned forward. "What's going on?"

The smile faded from the new soldiers' face, and he nodded to the warehouse. "There're some scientists inside. They're workin' on a weapon. I didn't want to go in there myself, even with this baby," he said, patting the SAW appreciatively. Then he grinned again. "But now we've got no problem. Doesn't matter what they've got in there now; four of us can tear those shits apart!"

Shephard crawled around Medic and Engineer and put out a calming hand. "Wait a minute. How do you know they're building a weapon?"

"Wouldn't you be?"

"Probably, but I'm not a scientist. We should go in peacefully. They might be able to help us."

Scowling, Bandana shook his head. "Fuck that, man."

Engineer nodded. "Yeah, I've seen some of the experiments these scientists have worked on. Some pretty nasty stuff. Ain't no way I want to be on the receiving end of that shit."

"But-"

Bandana straightened his back. "You with us or not, Corporal?"

"I-" Shephard's words became lodged in his throat as he looked at the three soldiers in front of him, all of them eager to kill something that wouldn't fight back. Even Medic was showing some enthusiasm for the idea.

He sighed and looked into Bandana's eyes. "Just wait until they make a move before you start shooting, all right?"

"Man, what the fuck is wrong with-?"

Shephard latched onto his throat. "I don't think I heard you right, soldier. I asked you a question, and you had better fucking answer."

A vein began to appear on the side of his head as he struggled against Shephard's grip. Both Engineer and Medic watched with morbid fascination at the exchange, either unwilling or unable to interfere.

Realising he was trapped, Bandana just nodded. Slowly, but not enough to show Bandana he was giving up, Shephard released his grip on the soldier and nodded gently to the others. All four of them rose. Bandana attempted to lead the way, but Shephard nudged his way in front of him.

"You stay at the back. No-one shoots until I order it."

Together, with Shephard leading the way and Bandana taking up the back, they walked to the front door. All of his boot camp training quickly coming back to him, Shephard counted silently to his comrades before kicking the rusted green doors off their hinges and bursting into the room, his fellow soldiers following him with an intimidating volley of yells and shouts.

The room was all but bare except for some green metal crates piled up here and there. In the far right corner, three scientists stood hunched over a small metallic object.

"See? A fucking weapon," Bandana spat.

The lead scientist, with frizzy black hair and glasses, stepped forward from the group, visibly shaking. "A-actually… it's not a weapon at all, it's-"

One of the scientists behind him scrabbled for the object and pointed it at the soldiers. With a roar, Bandana opened fire. With little encouragement, and despite Shephard's protests, Medic and Engineer quickly joined in.

And Shephard remembered what made the SAW such a deadly weapon. All the power of a mounted machinegun in a portable rifle.

The bullets tore through the scientists like paper, spreading blood and flesh all over the walls in a horrific mosaic.

The gunfire stopped, the last bang echoing out of the shattered windows and around the courtyard beyond, mixing with the tinkling of the bullets as they dropped to the floor. Bandana slowly walked over to the eviscerated bodies, gun still trained on them as though they would pop back to life at any moment. With a cautious strike of his boot, he hit the object they had been working on.

And that was when Shephard recognised it. They were working on a Displacer.

"They were trying to escape."

"Yeah, fucking *through* us," Bandana snorted over his shoulder.

"No," Shephard uttered slowly, his voice shaking, "they were just trying to escape. And with that thing they might have been able to take us with them."

"Or leave us behind. They're fuckin' scum, all of them."

Shephard put down his sniper rifle and walked over to Bandana, whose back was still to him. He waited until he was just behind the soldier before he spoke again.

"Soldier… give me your weapon."

Bandana turned around with a scowl. "What?"

Slowly, Shephard extended opened up his hand in front of Bandana. "Give me your weapon."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

Suddenly, his jaw was clenched as he grabbed onto the rifle, holding it crossways between them. "I said-" he delivered two elbows to the face, "-GIVE ME-" followed by a boot to the crotch, "-YOUR

WEAPON!" He finished with a double handed strike to the face, his fingers knotted together to make an extra thick fist. Bandana whirled around as he fell backwards, landing limply on his front.

Medic and Engineer were on him instantly, the former on his left, the latter on his right.

"Fuck, Corporal, calm down!"

Shephard looked over to their desperate faces. They were no better. They didn't object. Fuck, they probably enjoyed it just as much as Bandana. He turned to medic and delivered a head butt to his face, the rim of his helmet hitting just across the bridge of his nose. A solid crunch followed by a burst of crimson blood made him release his grip on Shephard's arm and stumble back.

Turning to Engineer, Shephard whirled his left fist around, which the other soldier blocked easily, grabbing onto it with his hand. Lifting his leg, Shephard stamped down on the soldier's kneecap. With a resounding pop, it dislocated from its' socket, sending the Engineer screaming to his knees, cradling the injured one while resting on the other. Shephard grabbed him by the sides of the head and pulled him towards him as he struck out with his knee, hitting him clear in the face. The screams were silenced as Engineer fell on his back, unconscious.

Shephard turned to the form of Bandana when Medic leapt up on his back, making him stumble a few steps this way and that before he managed to reach back and latch onto the soldier's clothing. With a mighty tug, he brought Medic whirling over his soldier and down onto the body of Engineer. Medic tried to get back up, but a swift kick to the crotch stopped him. Shephard kicked the soldier again and again, his voice becoming more desperate and disjointed as he spoke.

"They… were fucking… CIVILIANS!"

Suddenly, Shephard stopped, stumbling back from the carnage he had wrought on his own people. But they weren't his people. Not really. These people took pleasure in killing innocents. Relished it. This was not what Shephard signed up for. He wanted to help the very people he had been sent here to kill. Shephard had been many things while wearing his uniform. He had been scared, tired, enraged, desperate and weak. But he had never been ashamed.

He walked to the sniper rifle and silently slung it over his shoulder, concentrating on some dead point of the floor in front of him. He didn't want to look at anything in this room. Not the dead scientists, or the beaten… monsters lying on the floor… nothing.

Shephard walked to the SAW where it had fallen beside Bandana. As he lifted it, a limp gloved hand held onto it, stubbornly grasping the grip. He looked down at the bleeding soldier with dull eyes.

"We're the army. We don't kill civilians."

He swung the butt of the gun around, clipping it against the side of Bandana's head and knocking him unconscious. Without pause, he turned and left the warehouse, unsure of where he was going but not caring. With eyes that were now running completely on instinct instead of any will to continue, Shephard looked around the courtyard. In the distance, he could see another wrecked metal fire door allowing him passage into some other area the Godforsaken Black Mesa Facility. He started walking, sniper rifle hanging off one soldier while he rested the SAW on the other.

Three quarters of the way to the door, one of the big tiger striped pig creatures seemingly appeared from nowhere, bursting out from behind a broken container. Shephard turned the SAW on it and fired. Within a few seconds, the creature was dead in a burst of purple light. He looked down to the smoking weapon in amazement.

And that bastard had used this on innocent people.

Shephard continued on under the dented door and into the darkened warehouse beyond. Using his IR goggles, he managed to negotiate a complicated path through all of the collapsed debris inside, eventually coming to a huge open door. Well, it wasn't technically open. It looked more like it been cut open by something far hotter than the blowtorch an engineer could manage. On the wall beside him, Shephard could see a HEV charging station. If his trainers had put him in good stead, that would work for his PCV as well.

He took the cable and plugged it into the relevant socket. With an affirmative drone, it started charging. Outside, Shephard could hear the faint noise of machinegun fire rattling away and hitting something that was clearly bullet-proof. The charger groaned when it was done, and Shephard began to feel the effects of the PCV healing his system almost instantly.

That done, Shephard stepped out into the open air. He was standing on one end of a dam, the water on the left far higher than that on the right. In the middle of the dam, blocking his path to the other side, a monstrous tank of a creature stood. It was blue, scaly, and had a single glowing red eye that seemed to stare straight at him. Thick ropes tied around its' arms and legs bonded it to the guardrails on either side of the dam's 'road', and it slothfully struggled against them, as if there was no rush. Another sparkling light like the one he had encountered in the habitat, quickly followed by two brothers that followed it up into the cloudy sky.

Shephard's gaze travelled over to the water on the left. A control tower was erected out of the water, level with the dam and allowing a good view inside from where Shephard was standing.

And there he was.

The G-Man, watching proceedings with a neutral eye as he talked on his cell phone. He caught a glimpse of Shephard and smiled almost imperceptibly. But Shephard knew that he was. That smug shit. He had done all of this.

"BASTARD!"

Shephard took aim with the SAW and was ready to fire when a huge explosion from the blue creature blinded, deafened and knocked him on his back. He bypassed the ringing in his ears as he stumbled to his feet and staggered to the guardrail. He was gone. Once again, the G-Man had smirked in his face, at all the pain he had gone through, and just vanished in a puff of smoke.

His gaze travelled to the smoking crater in the middle of the dam. Or, as the case may be, vanishing in a huge vast explosion. Shephard spotted the two soldiers on the other side waving him over through the smoke. With a somewhat pensive attitude, Shephard picked up his weapons and started making his way across. Somehow, he didn't really feel like talking with more soldiers, either military or Black Ops. They both seemed like enemies at the moment.

As he approached the soldiers, he saw a cable leading from the explosion site to a box beside the soldiers, the handle pressed firmly down. Sometimes the old ways were best, it seemed. The explosion had exposed the middle of the dam and cracked a huge pipe inside. Shephard couldn't see much in the darkness below, and had little desire to explore the stench that wafted out of it.

Shephard slid down into the crater and started clambering up the other side when he heard the roar of gunfire up ahead. Peeking his head up over the top of the crater, he saw two of the Race X electricity creatures firing point blank at the soldiers while their enemies did the same. Before long, the soldiers had been blown back to the walls, blood puffing from their bodies like smoke.

One of them spotted him, and Shephard quickly turned. Maybe shit-pipe wasn't so bad after all. One last glance over his shoulder confirmed that they were sprinting his way, so Shephard started crawling. It didn't take long for him to reach what his fingers told him was a grate. He flicked on his IR goggles. The muttered gurgles of the alien behind him gave him a much needed motive, and Shephard started futilely wrestling with the grate.

A low creaking echoed down the pipe. He smiled in desperation. Maybe the grate was coming loose.

And then the pipe below him gave way, sending him tumbling into the darkness. With a hard thud and a very light splash, Shephard landed in a steady stream of sewage water, the current slowly pushing him forward. He let the flow take him as he grasped for the SAW, unwilling to let it escape his grasp.

Then he started falling again, this time down a diagonal section of the pipe. He never *did* like water parks.

(A/N: This is the chapter that I know will divide readers. I suppose it all depends on how you want to see Shephard and how he reacts to the incidents at Black Mesa. For me, I thought it was an interesting direction to take Shephard in, particularly for how it mirrors Gordon's emotional journey:

Gordon, someone who never really had strong views about anything except for his love for those close to him. He suddenly finds himself going from a hapless, slightly less than average guy to a killing machine. And yet, because of that lack of belief in anything bigger than himself, Gordon finds the impetus to move on because he's not expecting anyone to save him; he knows it's just him, and the different people and events he comes across just reinforce that view. So, while physically he may not be the hero (yet), he's already got the correct mindset of 'I don't want to, but no-one else can'.

Shephard, on the other hand, has been almost conditioned to believe in his country, and that the people in charge are looking out for his well-being and will pull his fat out of the fire if worse comes to worse. Only now, he finds that everything he believed in - everything he thought he was fighting for - was basically a big crock. And since he's come to rely on that support so much, his despair, naturally I think, consumes him. So Shephard, the soldier with years of training and a natural talent for combat, ends up going forth only on instinct, because that's what he's been 'programmed' to do. He has no

purpose, and he has an almost all consuming self loathing for what he's seen and what (from his point of view) he has been a part of.

And, obviously, the G-Man pisses him off big time.

So, that's my (shortened, believe me) justification of why I've written Shephard the way I did. In the end, I did it because it's different. BlindAcquiescence already has a superb story of a stronger Shephard, and he gives the soldier the surviving members of his squad to live for, at least in the Black Mesa segments. My Shephard is very much on his own, with no familiar faces or beacons of hope. At least, not right now.

So anyway, that's enough of that. On to the reviews, please!

Next Chapter: 'The Package'

The Package

-1Disclaimer: I don't own *Half-Life.*

The Black Mesa Incident

Chapter Thirty Four: "The Package"

The water roared around him as it shoved him roughly down the pipe and around corners, slamming him into the sides as he went. Through the luminescent green of his IR lenses, Shephard could see the pipe splitting off to the left ahead of him, sunlight shining through cautiously. He prepared himself to latch on with one hand, the other occupied with keeping the heavy SAW. With a grunt, he latched onto the very edge of the sub-pipe. His wrist shaking from the effort, he managed to pull himself upstream. He sighed as he saw the thick metal making up the grate.

With a resigned scowl, he released his grip, allowing himself to get pulled to where this pipe was determined to take him. But then another passage revealed itself on the left, with far more light pouring through. Having already practised with another, Shephard managed to latch onto his tunnel easily. He sighed again, but this time felt relief instead of irritated resignation. This grate had been torn asunder by something. Shephard hoped that whatever 'it' was hadn't stuck around, but still… it had done a good job of clearing the way for him.

With a few grunts that were drowned out by the rancid gushing water around him, Shephard pulled himself up into the tunnel and crawled his way out into the pool beyond. Looking around, Shephard saw a sandy shore at the far end of the pool, the walls around him far too high for him to climb. As he swam - an activity made far more difficult by the heavy weapon he carried - Shephard could make out two figures crouched against a rock face of a wall in front of him. His

initial caution became one of quiet dread as he saw that they were ordinary soldiers.

Ordinary, order following, innocent killing soldiers. Too weak to do much of anything, Shephard just climbed out onto the shore and staggered to his feet, wandering slowly over to the crouching soldiers. One wore a Gasmask, while the other had a Bandana tied tightly around his head. The similarity to the murdering soldier made Shephard tighten his grip on the SAW irrationally.

Gasmask nudged his comrade when he noticed Shephard approaching. Bandana looked over and squinted to make out Shephard's nametag.

"Shephard! Damn, I didn't think you'd still be alive!"

He frowned. "Do I… know you?"

Smiling, Bandana shook his head. "Nah. We just heard about you over the radio. You're makin' quite an impression."

Shephard just nodded blankly, and looked around the area. The sandy path he stood on went off to the right, slanted rocky walls on either side masking what lay beyond.

"What are you doing here?"

With a dour expression, Bandana hefted his M4 rifle in his arms. "Look… I don't know what those Black Ops are up to, but it doesn't involve getting us out of here alive." He looked to his comrade, who nodded, and then to Shephard. "We've got no choice but to fight our way out. We've been waitin' here until we could work up the nerve to go on."

Silence descended, and for a few moments, the only noise around them was the steady gushing of the water from the pipes behind them.

Then, nodding, Shephard checked the SAW and held it in a battle-ready position.

Bandana nodded. "Let's go!"

The two ran off before Shephard could say much of anything about plans or even being cautious, which he thought would have been obvious. Cursing at the weight of the SAW, he took off after them, his pace slowed considerably by the weapon. The pair of soldiers stopped at the end of the rocky 'corridor' and started firing off to their left, taking cover every now and then to avoid the bullets raining out from the unseen enemy. As Shephard reached them, Gasmask pulled a grenade from his vest and, standing in plain sight, tossed it with the finesse of a professional baseball player.

Bullets thumped painfully against his vest, two hitting his left leg, puffs of blood spurting out from the back as the metal travelled through. Bandana quickly grabbed the soldier and pulled him back to cover. Shephard knelt down beside him.

"What the hell were you throwing that was worth that?"

The grenade exploded, and the gunfire stopped.

Through the lenses of the Gasmask, Shephard could see the man's eyes wrinkle from the grin. "Mounted machinegun."

Bandana grinned right along with him, clapping his hand on Gasmask's shoulder in a moment of camaraderie that Shephard hadn't experienced in a long time. Instead of focusing on what he had lost, he concentrated on what was ahead.

"Keep moving, keep moving," he urged, gesturing for them to get up while he held the SAW at the ready. As Bandana helped Gasmask to his feet, Shephard continued on around the corner. Another lake of murky water lay before him, a large sandy island about twenty feet in front of him. In the middle of the island, Shephard saw the smoking remains of the mounted machinegun. The wreckage of a black

helicopter lay broken and warped in the water on the right of the island.

As slowly as he could manage to allow his comrades enough time to catch up, Shephard waded into the thigh deep water. He had just reached the island when he heard the two soldiers yelling. He whirled around and saw Gasmask dead in the water, floating face down from the vigorous cut to his neck. Blood seeped out into the water as Bandana staggered through it, struggling with the Black Ops soldier doing his utmost to slash his machete through him.

Shephard spat a curse as he dropped the SAW and took aim with the sniper rifle. The Black Ops soldier must have been hiding in the water. Christ, and he was fast. Bandana was struggling to keep up with hit rapid fire movements, and already seemed to have cuts on every other exposed part of his body. As Shephard brought the scope of the rifle to his eye, he saw the blade plunge into Bandana's throat. The soldier stood for just a few moments making choking nauseating noises as he stared at his enemy before he collapsed back into the water, floating in a pool of both his and his friends' blood.

The Black Ops soldier turned to him, and, with his black balaclava creasing into the shape of a smile, threw his arms out to the side. Shephard shot him in the neck, turned around, and left him to bleed to death beside his short term comrades.

Past the wreckage of the black helicopter (which he assumed belonged to the Black Ops themselves), Shephard saw that the water went off into a river through another rocky 'corridor' similar to the sandy one he had just come down with his now dead comrades. Eventually the water took him out onto land, and Shephard walked around a left-turning corner and into a much larger open area.

About the size of two football fields side by side, the sandy area gave way to a huge complex at the far end, the dull grey merging with the gradually fading light of the sky. In the middle of the area, a broken down two storey building simply sat, looking like it had been

bombed repeatedly and then blown up from the inside. A water tower stood proudly just ahead of it and to the right.

Beyond the water tower, also on the right, Shephard could see an impossibly tall gate leading to another part of the complex behind it. Shephard guessed that was the way to go. He stepped out on to the field.

After just three steps, a loud bang followed by a high pitched whine drew his attention upwards, where he saw a grenade not unlike those from the secondary trigger of an M4 twirling down towards him. Shephard dove forward, going into a roll as the grenade exploded, knocking much further forward than he had intended. Now almost behind the structure in the middle of the sandy field, Shephard scrambled to his feet and took cover, his breathing shallow as he rested.

Another bang, and a grenade came whining towards him again.

"Fuck," he breathed, scrambling to his feet and running as fast as his legs (and the SAW) would allow. The explosion shattered some of the building behind him, pelting him with grey cement and concrete as he ran, every breath burning in his lungs.

Another bang echoed through the air as he rounded the building, heading for the tall gate. Still running, he looked over to see a raised cement platform in the far left of the field extending out of the complex in front of him. On it, a human looking figure, silhouetted by the pink clouds behind it, stood behind the grenade launcher. For a brief moment, Shephard considered getting out his sniper rifle and taking a running shot at him or her.

The gate exploding beside him quickly changed that thought. He turned and headed for the huge red metal door in front of him, hoping by some miracle that it would open for him. And open it did.

Two Race X electricity aliens bounded out, flanking one of the tiger striped monsters. Shephard fell on his side as he skid to a halt,

scrabbling to his feet and quickly running the other way. Bolts of electricity shot past him, one catching him in the small of his back as he turned, knocking him off his feet and rolling to the ground.

He heard the grenade launcher go again, and was on his feet, gasping the pain away as best he could. A small metal door with a good old fashioned doorknob stood in the wall in front of him, and he sprinted for it, barging through it shoulder first. He slammed the door shut behind him, resting his back on it to stop any possible alien followers.

Shephard looked around as the exploding grenade rocked the building. He was at the bottom of a tower of stairs. A black shape emerged at the top. Shephard had already started firing with the SAW. The Black Ops didn't even get a chance to turn around before the weapon tore through him and pasted his insides on the wall.

Taking only a few seconds to catch his breath, Shephard pounded up the rest of the stairs. Two more Black Ops soldiers stood in his way at the top of the stairs, but both of them ended up being little more than cannon fodder for the SAW. Shephard took a moment to look down at the smoking weapon in his arms. The power it gave him was frightening and exhilarating all at the same time. He hoped he didn't get sucked into it as other soldiers most likely did.

In front of him, the corridor branched off to the right and to the left. The room on the right was a storage room, wooden crates lining every wall. After a quick check, Shephard pulled out his wrench and started breaking open his presents. Inside, he found ammo for his sniper rifle as well a fresh roll of pointed, deadly looking bullets for his SAW. After loading up the almost depleted war machine of a weapon, Shephard went back to the crossroads, this time opting to go left.

Some stairs awaited him, and Shephard cautiously made his way up and to the door at the top. Remembering that there was a Black Ops already up there operating the machine, Shephard figured that he would probably need to have as much mobility as possible. He

removed the sniper rifle from his shoulder and lay it on the ground, hoping there weren't any Black Ops in hiding in the building, ready to steal back the weapon.

Shephard brought the SAW to bear and opened the door with the barest of clicks. He peeked through. Nobody home. It was possible that one of the many Black Ops he killed on the way up here was the operator.

The way the door suddenly slammed into his body as he walked through corrected him of that assumption. The SAW was thrown from his hands by the impact of the door crushing him into the wall, and he watched it tumble helplessly off the platform and down onto the sandy field below. Beyond it, Shephard could see the annihilated remains of the Race X aliens, yellow patches of blood and scorched craters all they managed to leave behind.

He turned and kicked the door back at his unseen assailant. The Black Ops sidestepped out of the way, his M4 at the ready. Shephard grabbed it by the stock, aiming it upwards and pushing his enemy back. The two struggled for a few seconds, Shephard successfully pushing the Black Ops back a few steps before he suddenly turned, getting his arm around the weapon and grabbing onto the nozzle, almost like a headlock. Using his left arm, he delivered two swift elbows to the Black Ops' face, and then quickly pivoted his entire body forward, throwing the soldier over his shoulder simply from his iron grip on the gun.

The Black Ops landed with a thud on his back, and Shephard quickly moved the M4 around in his arms until it was pointed downwards at the covert operative's head. Twirling like a break-dancer, the Black Ops turned on the ground and kicked the weapon from Shephard's hands, sending it to the same fate as his SAW. He looked back to the Black Ops in time to see him flipping to his feet like a gymnast. Christ, what the hell were they teaching these bastards?

Shephard decided to find out.

He threw his right fist at him first, then the left. Both were blocked effortlessly, and countered by a swift kick to the chest that managed to push him stumbling towards the control panel behind him and onto his back beside it. The black-clad soldier rushed over to him, pulling out a silenced Glock and bringing it down to his head.

Shephard grabbed him with both hands by the wrist, diverting the weapon left as it fired. The bullet singed through his shoulder, but Shephard was already in motion and unable to stop for pain. His feet on the belly of the Black Ops, he flipped the soldier back over him, bringing him to a hard landing behind Shephard just beside the cannon itself and almost off the edge of the platform.

Still not allowing the pain to register, Shephard rushed the Black Ops just as he got to his feet, managing to jam the soldier's gun-hand into the cannon itself. Faster than he would have imagined, Shephard whirled around and pressed the launch button the control panel just behind the cannon. Wasting no time, Shephard leapt in the other direction, the explosion launching him into the wall beside the door with an incredibly painful thud.

In a sequence of events that was coming far too familiar to him, Shephard took a few moments to catch his breath and heaved himself to his feet, going back into the corridor to pick up his sniper before going down for the SAW. The bullet wound in his shoulder was healing fairly quickly, but that didn't stop it from hurting like an awfully loud bitch. Once down on the ground and re-armed, Shephard headed for the opened red door that, until just now, had been inaccessible to him. Unfortunately, he found that behind the door, the entire building had collapsed in on itself.

The simple metal door on the left using good old fashioned hinges and a doorknob seemed to hold promise, so Shephard tried that venue. The corridor wasn't in much better shape, but it was at least traversable, albeit with a little ducking, crawling and tripping up on hidden pieces of rocks required. After a few turns, he found himself at an open doorway leading into the broken remains of another large room like so many he had come across recently. The ceiling had

caved in, bathing everything in the melancholy yellow-pink light of the setting sun.

But the two electricity aliens and one big tiger striped creature didn't seem to feel melancholy. From the looks of them, they seemed absolutely livid. Shephard gripped the SAW, and prepared to fire. But then he became aware of a constant droning in the air, like an engine or turbine, or…

Shephard's eyes widened, and he took cover.

Helicopter blades. Like the Black Ops helicopter he had seen crashed in the lake.

As if to give him a happy confirmation of his theory, roaring mini-gun fire blasted out from behind him, quickly followed by the sound of two rockets launching from the wings. After the sounds of battle had died down, Shephard got to his feet and peeked through into the open room beyond. As expected, only yellow blood and burnt organs remained inside. The sound of the helicopter blades was ever-present, but it seemed to be a little further away for the moment, having just disposed of the immediate threat.

Looking around, Shephard saw another open doorway on the other side of the room. Constantly checking upwards for a sign of his hunter, Shephard sprinted into the dark room, diving through when he thought he heard the helicopter closing in. His dive turned into a forward roll, putting him on his back and looking up at the ceiling. At least, he *would* have been looking at the ceiling if he could have seen anything at all.

He flicked on his IR goggles, and came face to snarling face with an electricity alien, glaring down at him as if he intruded on some personal moment. With a roar he didn't know he had in him, Shephard unleashed the SAW on the creature's face, tearing it to pieces and knocking it on its' back. The electric roach hand weapon didn't pose much of a threat, the heel of his boot disposing of it without incident.

His breath suddenly gone, Shephard looked around while he allowed his lungs to refill. There was light coming from another doorway in front of him. And from the looks of it, there were stairs on the left. Shephard, sufficiently re-energised, thundered up the stairs with as much vigour he could manage for a fight against a helicopter.

On the floor above, Shephard could see down through a shattered wall into the open room he had just sprinted across, as well as, out of a different wall, into a courtyard area that seemed to hold promise as far as progress was concerned. A single, blank two storey complex stood in front of him, stretching out from right to left. On the far left, Shephard could see an open grate that had been swung up on its' hinges and left there. He nodded to no-one in particular. That would seem to be a good place to start.

Except for the fucking helicopter, Adrian.

Said helicopter was busy annihilating another one of the tiger striped creatures. Shephard actually managed to exude some pity for the creature as it staggered to fight against its' flying enemy. He could hear it wheezing as it desperately tried to at least hit the helicopter with one its' purple energy blasts.

Shephard set down the SAW and pulled out the sniper rifle. He loaded it, cocked it, and crouched in the appropriate position, keeping it trained on the cockpit of the helicopter. The windows were blacked out, as expected, but Shephard still knew where a helicopter pilot sat.

He fired one, cracking the glass.

Reload. Another shot, breaking through.

Reload. The helicopter was turning towards him now.

Third shot. Kill the pilot.

As though suddenly depressed, the helicopter's nose lurched downwards, the entire vehicle twirling around in the air until it finally collided with the building below, exploding with a brilliant flash.

The low crackle of the flames was all that served as a backdrop as Shephard gathered his things and leapt down into the courtyard below, using a closed dumpster to cushion his fall. As he landed, the clearly dying Race X monster turned to face him, making an alarmed squeal. It started charging a purple blast. Shephard stared at it, sniper rifle hanging off one shoulder while he rested the SAW on the other.

Do you really want to do this?

The creature continued charging for a few more moments before sagging, breathlessly, to the ground.

Shephard nodded, and lowered his weapon.

He walked past the creature, ignoring the way its' eyeless face followed him as he walked around the courtyard. A ladder led up to the roof of the building, and since all of the doors seemed to be locked tight, this would seem to be his only way forward. Shephard climbed up and made his way to the open grate. Down below him, Shephard could see some grates that displayed beneath them what looked like tarmac. The artificial yellow light bathing the floor said 'parking garage' to Shephard, and he hopped down.

Luckily, another of the lower grates was open, allowing him entrance into the disturbingly quiet complex below.

He landed looking at a parking attendant booth, two yellow and black striped barriers on either side. A crashed SUV was sat smoking against the garage door on the left, the wide open doors revealing no passengers inside. An old growl he hadn't heard for at least a few hours came to his ears, and Shephard turned to see one of the small hook handed Race X creatures, doing its' best impression of a fierce animal.

The SAW barely left anything behind once it was done firing. Shephard shook his head at the remains of the creature. It was hard to believe that he used to be scared of them. After huge electricity aliens and sewers full of creatures twice the size of polar bears, small pests with hooks just didn't seem to carry the same impact anymore.

A solid chain link gate on the left prevented him from going in that direction, so his only option was a road on his right that went further down into the complex. His boots clomped far too loudly on the concrete as he descended, walking around the various bends with such paranoia his neck muscles were beginning to ache from the constant tension.

He reached one final bend going off to the left, and pressed his back to the wall when he heard a teleportation. Several more followed. Shephard peeked around. A veritable task force of various Race X creatures stood in the area beyond, inspecting a parked Black Mesa SUV with the intensity of a child.

Shephard steeled himself up to make a move. He took one final deep breath and whirled around the corner when two grates opened up just behind the creatures, and five Black Ops soldiers descended from ropes. Shephard promptly backed up and out of sight. Damn, he was glad his enemies hated each other. If they found some way to communicate and get along, he would be seriously fucked.

The fighting went on for a quite a few intense minutes, explosions and gunfire quickly followed by alien curses and sizzling electricity blasts. Shephard again allowed himself a look around the corner. Only a few remained altogether; two Black Ops and one electricity creature. His gaze travelled to the SUV. Above it, a ceiling of grates yielded a quick exit to the vents above; one of the grates had fallen down and now rested on the roof of the SUV. And since all of the other exits were sealed off by the same thick metal chain linked gates as the route upstairs, it would seem to be Shephard's only route out of here.

With barely a grunt, one of the Black Ops fell. The two remaining combatants looked completely exhausted as they took cover from each other, firing off sporadically at each other in desperation.

Although he hated having to resort to such tactics, Shephard threw himself out and blasted them both to pieces with the SAW. Neither of them saw him coming. With just a quick glance between the two bodies, Shephard clambered up on the bonnet of the car before squeezing his way up into the grating above.

"N-now don't hurt me, a-an' I'll tell you a secret!" Shephard swung his weapon up with such speed it surprised even him. A security guard reminding him so much of Otis sat before him, his breathing laboured and his face shimmering with sweat. Shaking his head at what had almost just happened, Shephard sat back. Impatiently, he gestured to the security guard to continue.

"Oh. Um… I've been hiding up here listenin'. These Black Ops have some sort of *bomb.* I think they're plannin' on blowin' up the base. N-now why do you think they would do such a thing?"

Shephard had stopped listening at 'bomb'. It wasn't just a bomb. It was a freaking nuclear warhead. In a facility *full* of them. Setting off one would start a chain reaction that would cause so much destruction… Shephard couldn't even fathom it. All of this so the precious government could save face? He shook his head, his jaw clenched and fists tightly wound around the SAW.

He turned and started crawling.

"W-wait? Where're you goin'?"

Shephard turned to the fearful security guard. "I'm going to stop them."

Without even asking if the guard would help, Shephard continued crawling. As it happened, the security guard *didn't* want to help. At

least, that's what Shephard assumed from the fact that he wasn't following.

He crawled noisily around a few more corners, futilely trying to mask the noise his large boots and monstrous SAW were making. Finally, he came to an open grate in the bottom of a vent before him, and he dropped down into the parking lot below. Behind him, the room was sealed off by another metal gate. In front, at the far end of the room, Shephard could see the same kind of gate. Except his was one had been opened just a crack in the centre; enough to allow a person through, at any rate.

Just before the gate, a secure metal door with a broken lever system beside it drew Shephard's attention, and he walked to the small safety glass of the window there. He looked around, but couldn't see anything but some shelves inside with some paint and small boxes on them. With a shrug, he politely knocked on the door.

An incredibly frazzled security guard appeared, scowling at him from behind his growing salt and pepper stubble. His voice was muffled by the door as he spoke.

"Are you crazy? I'm not opening this door until someone turns that bomb off."

Shephard frowned. "Where is it?"

The guard wordlessly pointed to his right with his finger, towards the opened gate. Shephard nodded and set down the SAW. There was no way he was letting a stray bullet make him the cause of all of these people dying. He slipped the sniper rifle from his shoulder and cocked it slowly and quietly. Feeling the security guard's eyes on him, he made his way through the gate and into the tunnel beyond.

At the far end, just before another closed off gate, a pickup truck was parked. There were two Black Ops. One was stood by the truck, watching what the other was doing. Said other was kneeling on the

trailer of the truck, working on something in a large green metal case.

Suddenly, Shephard's throat was very dry. He readjusted his grip on the sniper rifle. As quietly as he could manage, he tried to control his breathing. He took aim at the soldier working on the warhead. As he squeezed the trigger, the Black Ops hand slipped, or at least that was what it looked like from Shephard's viewpoint.

The other soldier visibly flinched. Looked like even Black Ops were afraid of nuclear bombs. "Be careful with that thing! One false move, and this whole facility is gone."

"I've got it covered," the other snapped irritably. "You just keep your eyes open, there's still some targets running around out there."

The other Black Ops, obviously not convinced at his comrades' supposed proficiency with nuclear weapons, just nodded and started turning around. Shephard cursed and readjusted his aim for him. His target managed half a warning cry before the bullet blasted through his forehead. The remaining Black Ops turned around from where he stood, weapon-less. Shephard took him out, and he fell back towards the bomb.

It beeped loudly, and the soldier's body collapsed forward and off the trailer, landing awkwardly on the tarmac below. Shephard dropped the sniper rifle and ran to the warhead. His fingers shook as he moved them over the control panel that was opened to him. The shrill, continuous beeping of the thing didn't seem to be indicating anything good to him.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck…"

He couldn't see any countdown. How the fuck did this thing work?

A large silver button in the middle of the control panel had a green lights circling it. To him, green meant good. Safe. Red meant alarm. Panic. Explosions. He thought about it for a moment. As it was, they

were probably all going to blow up if he did nothing. But if he did something, everyone would either die right now instead of after a countdown, or they would survive.

"Oh, shit…" he hissed through clenched teeth, scrunching his eyes shut. He slammed his palm down on the button.

The beeping stopped.

Nothing happened.

Shephard looked down at the bomb. Nothing was flashing anymore. He grinned and threw his arms out to either side, letting out a large roar of a laugh.

An off switch.

"A fucking *off* switch!"

For a few moment, he simply stayed in his crouched position, watching the inert bomb lay there on the trailer before him. It really was a thing of beauty, life. In that moment, he felt so invigorated. Hell, *that* was why he need to survive. So he could tell someone that he averted an honest to God nuclear disaster.

With more energy than he had felt in a long time, Shephard hopped down from the truck and walked back to the door, picking up his weapons as he went. The security guard looked equally delirious.

"Whew! That was a close one." He walked to an unseen lever beside the door on his side. "You'd better get in here." With a clang, the door swung open for him, and Shephard stepped through.

"It's not going to be easy from here on out." Shephard almost had to smile at that. So everything up to his point *had* been easy? "The only way out is through the level four storage unit… but it's a mess down there. The Black Ops were using it as a staging point until the aliens came in. If you do make it through, do me a favour?"

Everything sounding reasonable to him at the moment, Shephard just nodded.

"Make sure you have them come back for us."

His smile faded from behind his gasmask. It still wasn't over. There were people here who needed him. Who, even though they weren't going to die in an explosion of nuclear heat, they would eventually expire from being abandoned. And Shephard was the only one in any real position to help those he had come across. The ones who hadn't been murdering scum, anyway.

The two soldiers, Beard and Beret, the only two he had met so far who had survived the experience. The scientist hiding amongst the remains of the enormous worm creature. Magnusson, wherever the hell that bastard was. Gordon Freeman, if he ever returned to Earth. Shephard would like to see him after this was all over. To talk to someone else who had met insanity in so many forms and still managed to come out the other side.

The scientist he had given one of his only weapons to in a bid to show him how mistaken he was about the military. And, of course, all of the scientists who had helped him survive the helicopter crash that had brought him into this hell. He wasn't sure if he loved them or hated them for bringing him through.

But either way, they deserved to live, and Shephard was going to do everything he could to make sure they did. Because *that* was why he became a soldier. Not for his country, but to protect those in need and stop anyone who stood in the way. And that was one hell of a purpose.

Shephard nodded at the security guard and turned to the corridor behind him, one that hadn't been visible to him from the other side of the door. He looked back to the security guard.

"Is that the way?" he said, nodding in that direction.

"Yep."

"Do you want to come along?"

The security guard smiled, but not in a way that said 'hell yes, I would!'.

"Sorry, but I've gotta make sure no-one else comes through this door."

A curious frown wormed its' way onto Shephard's face. "Why did you let me through? For all you know I could have killed you as soon as you opened the door."

"Nah. Bad guys don't knock."

The frown gave way to a smile. The smile, a small chuckle. And then, they were both laughing. Laughing at the whole thing. The aliens, the Black Ops, the soldiers, all of it having been overridden by one thing:

Good manners.

Eventually, the laughing died down, and Shephard extended a hand to the security guard. "Thank you."

With firm grip, the security guard shook it. "Any time."

After a grateful nod, Shephard turned and head down the corridor, his pace far quicker than before, powered by purpose and hope. After a few turns, he passed a window on his left. Curiously, he noted that it was the tunnel with the warhead inside. He almost missed the shadowy figure stooped over it, working on the device.

It was him. The G-Man. With his briefcase in one hand and working on the warhead with the other, the G-Man undid everything Shephard had thought he had accomplished today. Everything he had fought for, everyone he had seen die… all so this smirking piece of shit could take everything away from him.

"No. No, you *fucking don't!"*

Shephard turned and ran down the corridor.

"Open the door!" he yelled as he came around the corner into the entrance room.

The security guard lay dead on the floor, an alien crab creature suckling on his covered head. Beside him, the lever to open the door was scorched and warped. Shephard ran to it and desperately tried to pull it open. The lever come off in his hands.

"NO!"

Shephard ran back through the winding corridor and to the window. The G-Man was still there, leisurely pressing random buttons on the device. His breath hissing through his teeth, Shephard backed up and took aim with the SAW. Screaming for everything he had been through this day, Shephard unloaded the entire weapon into the window. The thick glass was merely cracked and frayed by the bullets. He dropped the SAW and ran at it, slamming his shoulder into it again and again. Each time, it was like hitting a brick wall.

He stopped, reduced to only being able to look through the glass and stare at the pale man as he went about his work. With one last tap of a button, the G-Man seemed satisfied and stood up to his full height. He straightened his tie and looked over at Shephard. The man gave him the barest of nods and a smile before delicately stepping off the truck and walking to the metal gate in front of the truck. With barely any effort, he moved the gate aside and stepped through, neatly closing it behind him and disappearing into the darkness beyond.

All Shephard could do was stare through the cracked glass. Stare at the flashing control panel of the warhead. Stare at his failure. Why go on?

"WHAT THE FUCK IS THE POINT?!"

He whirled around, smashing his fist into the wall. With the barest of beeps, his PCV informed him of the injury. But the sound was lost amongst the sound of his own blood throbbing through his ears. On his left, Shephard could see a cargo elevator that would take him down to the Level Four Storage Unit. To more Black Ops, more Race X and more death. Resting his hands on the wall in front of him, Shephard stared down at the spent SAW below him, the fifty or so spent bullet casings scattered around it.

His jaw clenched. He would show them all. He would go down there and find his way out of this place. And he would kill everyone and everything that stood in his way. Be they Black Ops, aliens, soldiers, security guards or scientists… he would kill them all if they tried to stop him. No more soul searching, no more struggles with his own morality.

He was Corporal Adrian Shephard. And he was going to make them fear him. He took the sniper rifle with him. That was all he needed really. His speciality. No-one ever saw him coming when he was behind a sniper rifle. Shephard walked to the elevator and stepped inside. He elbowed the button beside him viciously, and he descended.

And if that G-Man got in his way, well…

He would just have to kill him too.

(A/N: Only three more to go, folks… exciting, isn't it?

Anyway, reviews please!

Next Chapter: Interloper)

Interloper

-1Disclaimer: I don't own *Half-Life.*

The Black Mesa Incident

Chapter Thirty Five: Interloper

Expecting to land with a painful thud, Gordon was surprised to land as though he had just stepped out of a car. A loud thunderclap accompanied his first step, and he looked around the vast, green sky surrounding him. It was ominously still.

" *Done… what have you done…"*

The voice seemed to come from all around him, but didn't echo or reverberate as a loud voice would. Instead, it felt like it was… inside his head? Gordon frowned. That wasn't really something he needed. The voice had spoken in a slurred, stilted manner, indicating that it wasn't really comfortable with English. Which also meant it was probably plucking its' knowledge of the language from his head.

So that was *two* things he didn't really need right now.

The slow voice didn't seem to have anything else to say, so Gordon looked around his new terrain. It was relatively similar to the first area of Xen he had encountered; a dozen or so rocky platforms orbiting a much large island below. As before, spires stood high from the ground, reminding Gordon of a power plant. Electricity crackled up their length before disappearing at the top with a brilliant, if small, flash.

This island was bigger than the last, though. It even managed to fit in some hilly terrain on the far side. Two large blue objects reminiscent of Stingray fish floated past him, sporadically firing a twisting bolt of golden energy down at the ground. Gordon had seen these things

before, back on Earth. They were dropping off those armoured aliens, the ones with the buzzing insect weapons.

He wasn't too keen on having to fight his way through any aliens at all at the moment. One huge mother alien was quite enough for the immediate future, thank you. Looking over, he followed their path across the island until they ended up at a floating platform which held something of great interest to Gordon. It was one of the hourglass shaped teleporter devices. A green-y yellow bolt of energy throbbed and pulsated in the centre of the shape. Hopefully that was just another form of portal. As soon as the stingrays reached the platform, they disappeared in a puff of purple smoke.

Looking back to where they had come from, Gordon could see them coming back again, heading for the same destination. Gordon smiled as the plan formulated and cemented in his brain. He prepared the timing of his jump.

A loud cracking sound below him quickly made him look down. The platform was breaking apart, and the stingray was getting to him nowhere near fast enough. A choked gasp drew his gaze up, and he caught sight of two of the floating, big-headed creatures that had attacked him in the Lambda Core teleport chamber. Down below, newly appeared electricity aliens glared up at him, steadily charging their green energy blasts.

Gordon ran for the stingray and activated the Long Jump device. It hissed compliantly as the aliens below fired on the platform, blowing it to pieces. As he flew across the green sky, Gordon realised that he was going far too fast to land on the stingray, and would likely overshoot it. With a faintly uttered curse that Barney would have thought too girly for the current situation, Gordon tucked the shotgun under his arm and swung his legs forward, signalling the device to slow his forward motion.

The hissing from the device didn't change one way or the other, but he certainly felt it slow, and within a few moments he gently touched down on the smooth blue surface of the stingray. It didn't seem to

object or even notice his presence, so Gordon just clung on with one hand while looking around for the floating aliens. The two were closing in on him, although they seemed reluctant to fire while he was on the back of one of their allies. Gordon glanced back to the creature beneath him. He guessed they must be valuable commodities around this place.

His gaze travelled up, and he saw he was nearly to the platform. The fact that the creatures disappeared in puffs of smoke the last time they reached it hadn't escaped Gordon's memory, and he timed his jump so it gave him a fairly big margin of error. With a loud, continuous hiss, the Long Jump module took him to the platform, but Gordon noticed far too late that he had jumped too high, and was going to collide with the top of the hourglass instead of landing beside it.

Gordon didn't even have time to say anything before he collided chest first with the top of the structure, landing in an awkward heap before it.

"Oh… ow…"

He rubbed his dizzied head as he clambered to his feet. The strangled noise of the creatures above him quickly made him shake it off, and within a few seconds he had picked up his shotgun and stepped into the crackling 'doorway' before him.

Blackness surrounded him, interrupted by the briefest of green flashes.

Then, suddenly, he was somewhere else, as though he had simply opened a door and closed it behind him.

" *Die… you all… die… you all… die…"*

If he hadn't heard the same voice earlier, Gordon would have thought it was echoing because of the cave he was standing in. As it was, he was becoming slightly worried that the creature was

becoming gradually more and more lucid. Just how much did it know about him?

He couldn't see much ahead of him out the front of the cave; just a greyer shade of green blanketing the sky. Gordon looked around. Another hourglass structure, no doubt the one he had just stepped through, sparked and fizzled weakly. So there wouldn't be a return trip anytime soon. Not that Gordon would know how to navigate his way back to Earth as it is. Every portal he had come through so far had sealed itself behind him. Which wasn't particularly comforting, now that he thought about it.

Behind the flickering structure, Gordon made out the figure of another HEV clad scientist, sat limply against the wall with his or her helmeted head slumped against their shoulder. Although Gordon was again tempted to claim a helmet for himself, part of him noted that he probably wouldn't like what he would find beneath.

And so, he turned around and headed for the mouth of the cave, shotgun at the ready. The sky was simply an endless grey mist extending all around him, small balls of light randomly placed on the horizon like tiny suns. It would have been breathtaking if it wasn't so terrifying. The damp, rocky floor ended just a few feet ahead of him, but he had the option of going left or right.

As he took a leaning peek around to the right, a familiar sight writhed into view. The green tentacle monsters from the rocket test chamber. Or at least, one of them. It was too far away to reach him, even if it had noticed his presence. Hell, for all he knew, it had, but was aware of its' limitations. Gordon nodded. He respected that in an alien killing machine.

Turning around, he explored his only other option. The wall of the cave beside him slanted down, creating a hill above it. A quick look around the rocky mound gave Gordon his destination. Before him lay a huge quarry of an area. On the hill he now hid behind and on one beside it, two of the armoured alien creatures stood guard. Whether they were watching specifically for him, or simply on guard duty,

Gordon didn't know. But they weren't really what was holding Gordon's attention. No, it was the sizeable canyon broken into the far wall of the quarry directly in front of him. If it weren't for the damn guards, he would be home free. Or at least, 'the next alien death trap' free.

Gordon reminded himself not to try and make fun of sports terms. As Barney had reminded him so many times, it just made him seem bitter about being so bad at them. Of course, most of the jocks at his old high school had probably never fought their way through a huge, city sized scientific facility while fighting off aliens, soldiers and every single natural disaster known to man. And to top it all off, he had been entrusted with the safety of the world.

Take *that*, Eric Collins in 10th grade.

He shook his head free of such thoughts and concentrated on what exactly he was going to do. As he rested back on the side of the cave's mouth, the Long Jump module dug awkwardly into his back.

Silently, he cursed the device.

Then he realised something.

Silently, he praised the device.

With the Long Jump Module, he would be able to shoot across that field in no time. Hell, their hornet bullets probably wouldn't be able to keep up with him. Well, maybe not, but Gordon lived in hope that fate would throw him a bone at *some* point. Then again, he had probably used up all of his bones every time he fought a soldier, fell of a cliff or ran headfirst into an alien army.

Reconsidering his position, Gordon was grateful for all the bones he had thus far received, and needed no more for the time being, thank you very much.

Cricking his neck, Gordon stepped out between the two hills. Neither of the creatures had noticed him yet. With a deep breath, he launched himself forward, allowing the hissing device on his back to take him as far as it could go before he threw himself into another jump.

The creatures' growls echoed all around the sizeable quarry, and from nowhere, something that sounded amazingly like Earth alarms sounded. Glancing over to his right for the source, Gordon saw three solid (yet organic) looking towers rising and falling from the ground, encased in a complicated metal framework that twisted and bent upwards to the sky. At the very tip of each of the frameworks, a light flashed red.

Who would have thought that red meant the same thing on Xen?

Beside each of the towers, an electricity alien watched him as he bounded across from them. But none of them made a move to stop him. They simply stood and observed. The armoured aliens, on the other hand, were nowhere near as docile, and were more than willing to pitch in to the resistance movement. The sharp buzzing of the hornets quickly caught up with Gordon, and just as he reached the canyon, two sharp pains cracked into his right shoulder and the back of his left leg.

His landing otherwise impaired, Gordon tumbled forward in an awkward roll that didn't stop until he hit a wall of rocks rear first, ending up looking at the ceiling. Gordon genuinely wished he had the time to lie on his back with his feet resting on an alien rock, just staring at a golden crystal in the ceiling. But, as the loud growl fast approaching from behind hastened to remind him, time was something Gordon Freeman would never take for granted again.

Scrambling to his feet, Gordon realised that the growl hadn't come from behind; the reverberation of the canyon around him only made it seem that way. Slowly, he peeked over the haphazardly placed boulders in front of him. Inside, Gordon saw another of the Gargantuan blue creatures, like the one he had blown up in Black

Mesa with the military air strikes. Or the one he had killed at the tram station.

When he thought about it, Gordon was really kicking ass today.

It was pacing aimlessly from side to side in a circular sort of 'junction' in the canyon. Directly behind it, Gordon could see a cave leading to yet another part of this twisted, obviously broken island. The creature took that moment to notice his comparatively miniscule head poking over the top the boulders. Lumbering towards him, the ground shaking with every step, the creature lifted its' hands to remove the blockage in the way.

Gordon activated the Long Jump and used it as he ran up along the wall. The girlish yelp he let out as he twirled uncontrollably past the roaring creature and into the 'room' beyond did nothing to diminish how impressed he was with himself afterwards. He smiled as he looked back to the wall he had just traversed. He had just done a Matrix. That was pretty damn cool.

Oblivious to how impressive the move was and more irritated that its' little orange prey had got away, the blue monster turned and started coming at him again, lifting its' sizeable claws in a manner Gordon had seen before. It meant that pretty soon, it would start turning on the blowtorches from hell.

Gordon turned and ran to the cave that would lead to his freedom. More boulders stood in his way, but he quickly traversed them.

And almost fell into the seemingly bottomless chasm below.

"Where the hell did…?"

Another distinctive rumble from behind him dissuaded any more stupid questions, and Gordon leapt once again, activating the Long Jump as the creature fired. He could feel the heat on his ankles as he flew through the air. But he didn't care; once again, he was in the clear and ready for whatever else was coming.

And then the Long Jump Module stopped hissing.

Any hint of satisfaction that had wormed its' way onto Gordon's face was now well and truly gone. All he had left was sheer panic as he tumbled down towards the ledge instead of over it. With a grunt, he tossed his shotgun onto the ledge as he descended. It landed successfully, but the bespectacled scientists didn't have much of a chance to celebrate before he slammed chest first into the thick rock.

His pained grunt echoed down the chasm below, reminding him just how far he had to drop if his skinny little arms failed him. And, to top it all off, his glasses were crooked. If he dropped them down the chasm now, that was pretty much it. Oh, the irony. The great war machine Gordon Freeman, beaten because he didn't wear contacts to work today. Gordon's expression hardened.

Like hell.

After a few breaths, Gordon threw his left leg up and successfully onto the ledge beside him, the tip of his toe just managing to get a grip. With that amazing acrobatic feat accomplished, Gordon pushed down with his hands for all he was worth, slowly and shakily rolling himself up and onto the solid yet soggy ground.

And here he was again, staring up at the ceiling after yet another daunting physical feat. But then Gordon remembered the cause of said feat and sat up, quickly removing the Long Jump Module from his back. His HEV suit pinged in protest, irritated at being separated from its' kin, regardless of whether it was working or not. And, judging by the severe amount of melted orange goo coming from the back, Gordon decided he would have to go with a resounding 'not'. And since he didn't design the damn thing or even use it outside of training sessions, it looked like it was staying put. Which would be a problem if there was anymore jumping between floating platforms to be done.

However, a quick press or two of the test buttons indicated that the right jet was working, just not the left. *So,* Gordon mentally theorised,

tapping the device thoughtfully as he looked out the grey misty sky on his right, *if I just adjust my jumps… I should be okay.*

He sighed. Gordon hated the word 'should', especially when it was followed by the words 'be okay'. It meant he was going to be in a world of pain in a few minutes time. As he slipped the device back onto his shoulders - his HEV suit welcoming it back with a positive beep - Gordon resolved not to use it unless absolutely necessary.

Naturally, what he saw beyond the cave made it necessary.

The ground in front of him led out onto a curved bridge of sorts, moving out in front of him before curving in a semicircle off to the right, leading to what Gordon could just barely make out as another miniscule crack in the rock face, at least big enough to allow one of the armoured aliens through. But coming out of a hole in the ground below the bridge… *that* was a problem.

A trio of the green tentacle monsters had decided to set up camp there, and were making a delightful show of thrashing around and smashing their gigantic beaks into the bridge. Gordon felt like he was being mocked.

At that moment, he decided he didn't like being mocked.

Taking a few steps back, Gordon tried to remember that his -for lack of a better term- jetpack would only be blasting out of the right nozzle, so he would have to adjust his jump accordingly. So if he wanted to go to the right, his best bet would be to turn around and back up onto the bridge, and then make a jump for it, going left.

Gordon scowled at how little that made sense, and decided to simply wing it and see how things ended up. With a deep breath, he ran to the ledge and aimed for the other end of the curved bridge. If he could, he would rather bypass the whole thing, and, God willing, he would land relatively painlessly on the other side.

He jumped, and the Long Jump Module activated, the spurting of the jets behind him less than encouraging. But even more worrying was the fact that he was barrelling straight towards one of the tentacle monsters. True, it was the one closest to the exit… but that really didn't reassure him in any way. Grasping the shotgun by the stock with his left hand, Gordon reached out with his right.

As the creature heard him approach, it lifted its' beaked, small eyed head in order to strike down at the insect hissing towards it. Gordon latched onto the neck just below the beak, swinging around with the Long Jump's momentum guiding him around in a full semi-circle. When he came around to the crack in the rock face, Gordon released his grip, allowing the Long Jump to continue doing its' job and transport him to safety.

But as he travelled between the two walls and through the rocky corridor beyond, Gordon noticed that no matter how he swung his legs forward, the Long Jump wouldn't stop. It continued throwing him forward, and, as the left jet finally gave up and died, it sent Gordon spinning around into the open area beyond. Several boulders and outcroppings of rock stood around one of the hourglass teleporters, as though guarding it. As Gordon shot past in an inadvertent rush, he noticed that two of the armoured aliens were hiding behind a rock each.

As though sensing their presence, the Long Jump did the most obvious thing; it sent Gordon hurtling down towards the one on the left. It barely had a chance to look up before Gordon bore down on it with the speed of a bull, knocking it back and into the wall behind it. Gordon ended up lying atop with the creature with his legs in the air, his feet just managing to tickle the aliens'… well, it didn't really have a nose, but if it did, Gordon guessed that his feet would be tickling it.

"Sorry," he mumbled, slowly rolling himself off and straightening his askew glasses. He frowned. 'Sorry'? Where had *that* come from?

The creature was out cold, however, which was a bonus. And something in the impact had disengaged the Long Jump, which

Gordon also counted as a good thing at the moment. The glowing, whirring beauty of the portal beside him beckoned, and Gordon picked up his shotgun to continue on.

A deadly growl behind him made him increase his pace somewhat, and Gordon leapt inside just as he heard the distinctive buzz of the hornet weapon.

He half expected to feel the old stinging sensation in his backside, but was once again surprised as he stepped out into someplace completely different. The bright luminescence of the portal behind Gordon bathed him in a blue light that made him squint. He jerked himself back to reality and backed away from the hourglass teleporter behind him. If it was still open, that creature could follow him through…

Keeping his shotgun trained on the portal, Gordon slowly backed his way into the only exit he could see from the quick glances over his shoulder; a corridor leading into whatever alien complex lay beyond.

He waited until the portal was completely out of sight before he turned around again, and even then he kept an ear out. As he walked down the corridor, a distinctive hazy purple light mingled with the deep, dark blue of everything around him. His gaze fell on the walls, and for the first time he took them in. They looked like the ribs of the some… creature, all sewn together to make a web along the walls, with blue muscles spread across beneath as padding.

Unconsciously, he ran a hand down it. The walls had a spongy feel to them, while the web felt completely solid. Like… bone…

Gordon withdrew his hand and started wiping it on his leg. He stopped and shook his head at the stupidity of the subconscious gesture.

He walked on, and had to stop at the exit of the corridor to take in the chamber before him. He was inside a cylindrical chamber, extending up as far as the purple haze replete across the area would

allow him to see. The highest objects he could see, however, were two conveyer belt like bridges running across from one end of the chamber to the other. Atop them, large round objects that Gordon could only assume were eggs balanced seemingly precariously on the belts as they ran out of doorways on one side and into another on the opposite side.

He was on the bottom shelf of what he could see were three shelves that curved around the chamber, taking up approximately half of it. A flat, simple platform attached to a pylon indented into the shelves rose and descended at regular intervals, eventually reaching the conveyer belts.

Gordon had no idea how the conveyer belts were kept in place. There didn't seem to be anything holding it, just a small stone bridge of sorts between belts. Something else was unnerving him as well. Everything was so silent. Nothing made a noise. Not the machinery, nothing. In front of him, brown skinned electricity aliens worked calmly and equally silently, pushing the eggs onto the platform and then signalling to another of their comrades above to raise it up. This wasn't going to be at all easy.

Slowly making his way forward, he tried to keep to the walls to avoid being spotted by any of the aliens above. The one on his floor seemed to be the only one around. He crept forward, inching his way closer and closer. As he got within a few footsteps, he pulled out the crowbar and prepared for a stealthy blow to the head.

Then his booted foot caught on something, and he tumbled. The creature whirled around almost before he hit the ground, staring down at him with its' red eyes widened in shock. Gordon pulled up the shotgun and cocked it, not particularly caring about the loud noise that echoed around the otherwise silent chamber. Stealth was pretty much blown by this point.

But then, the creature did something that surprised him. It pulled on something on a nearby pillar, letting the platform beside it descend. With an urgent flick of the head, it gestured to the platform.

For a few moments, Gordon just stared up at the creature, eyebrow cocked. But then, as he looked into the creature's eyes, he saw something other than the usual blank ferocity he was used to.

There was desperation in those red eyes.

Feeling just as frightened as his new comrade appeared to be, Gordon slowly climbed to his feet and stepped onto the platform. After the briefest of nods, the creature pulled again on the pillar, and Gordon rose up to the next shelf. He half expected the creatures up there to attack. But all of them seemed to be making a pointed effort *not* to see him. Those that *did* accidentally look at him quickly averted their gaze, occupying their attention with something else.

An alien stood beside the pillar spared a quick glance around the chamber before pulling on a similar white growth, sending Gordon up to the conveyer belts.

He frowned. Were they setting him up for a trap? Were hundreds of aliens going to pop out of those eggs and rip him to shreds?

Looking down, Gordon noticed both of the pillar guarding aliens staring up at him, their gazes as pleading as their were unnerving. So they were victims in this place, too. Aliens, yes, but victims nonetheless. Whether they were just a precious few or a representation of the entire race, it didn't matter. Gordon had to do his best to help them. With a new resolve, Gordon looked for his next exit.

The conveyer belt in front of him was sending the eggs from left to right. In both the exiting and entering passageways, Gordon saw a shimmering wall of light that the eggs passed through without complaint. But somehow, Gordon had the feeling he probably wouldn't enjoy being pressed against it while a huge egg squashed against him the other way.

Timing his steps, Gordon moved out onto the conveyer belt and onto the small stone bridge that linked it to the next belt. This one also

had eggs going from left to right. But unlike its' twin, the exit was not covered with a blue shield. Whether this was accidental or something the aliens below had done, Gordon didn't know. But he had learnt that opportunities to survive were things to be taken. And so, Gordon stepped between two boulder sized eggs and allowed himself to be carried away by the surprisingly sturdy machine.

Eventually he entered the corridor ahead, and could only watch as the egg in front of him dropped down out of sight. Looking down, Gordon saw that the conveyer belt suddenly stopped and led down to a perfectly square pool of glowing water. It looked just wide enough to accommodate the eggs, and deep enough to be an entirely new system of underwater conveyer belts.

It wasn't something Gordon thought he would enjoy, so as he fell, he reached out with one hand and latched the entire arm over the ledge of the tall, square pool. He only just managed to heave himself out over the top as another egg came silently tumbling down, landing with nary a splash behind him as he dropped to the ground below. He couldn't tell if the ground was soggy, or if it was his own boots squelching.

Just above him, a walkway overlooked his position. With guardrails. They had *guardrails* on an alien planet. But not a highly valued, overflowing-with-money complex like the Black Mesa Facility, oh no. They relied on nearby *pipes* and *jumping skills* to traverse their walkways.

Off to his right, a wide, murky passageway beneath the walkway allowed Gordon the barely silhouetted view of another of the electricity aliens, surrounded by eggs that dwarfed its' spindly figure. What was in those eggs? More of the electricity aliens? Or something he hadn't met yet?

Looking up to the walkway again, Gordon could see another of the electricity aliens, again ignoring him or at least doing its' best impression of doing so. His gaze travelled down to the left beneath the walkway, and there, Gordon saw a pillar that seemed to rise and

fall out of the ground every fifteen seconds or so. As he got closer, he saw a perfectly sized hole in the corner of the walkway above, allowing whoever (or whatever) that stood on the pillar to ascend up.

It was amazing how similar they were to human beings. If Gordon hadn't been soiling his HEV suit with the fear of being killed at any moment, he would have marvelled a little more at the beauty of it all.

Waiting for the platform to sink solidly into the ground, Gordon stepped on, and let it carry him up, pressing every single limb he could as close to his body to avoid getting it lopped off. The last thing he needed was a severed limb dangling around inside his HEV suit. The electricity alien had its' back to him, pretending to watch something down below where he had once been. But somehow, Gordon knew it was watching him as much as it could, figuring out where he was and then trying its' best not to look in that direction.

Gordon didn't want to give it anymore reason that necessary, so he started walking past it down the walkway. It led through a small doorway. Beyond was a walkway overlooking a deep, bottomless cavern. He turned around to go back the way he came. Maybe there was another way out there.

He froze. One of the floating, big-headed creatures, coming down from the invisibly black ceiling. It looked to the electricity alien almost accusingly, and suddenly, with a loud yell, the creature stumbled back, clutching at the green bond around its' neck. It fell to its' knees, and suddenly, the pain stopped. Gasping for breath, the creature looked to its' 'master', and then to Gordon. Looking almost saddened, it climbed to its' feet and turned towards him. It started charging.

Looking from left to right, Gordon lifted his shotgun, aiming it for the electricity creature. Then, ignoring how his gut instinct was screaming at him, he turned and fired on the controller. The pellets ripped through the creature, sending it tumbling down to the ground with a high pitched wail. The electricity alien fired, sending a bolt of

green energy past Gordon and exploding wildly on the wall behind him.

The alien froze, looking from Gordon down to the controller below. Then, looking back to him, it nodded in the direction Gordon had come from, gesturing with a vague wave of its' spindly, clawed hand to the left hand corner. Gordon looked over as he walked past the alien. There was light coming from somewhere beyond, becoming all the more visible in the haze that surrounded them.

He looked back to the creature and nodded. But it wasn't interested in thanks, and merely gave him a shove in the back. Gordon stumbled forward and did as he was told, walking purposefully into the chamber beyond.

A long, tall corridor stretched out in front of him, the pale fog making it difficult to see exactly where it ended. But one thing was for certain; there were a *lot* of eggs in here. And Gordon had no desire to open even one of them, let alone the dozen or so that were gathered around him. He slowly started creeping his way through them, when that old throaty gasp sounded above him.

Looking up, one of the controller creatures floated down from the abyss of the fog above him, stick-thin hands already glowing with golden energy. Gordon started running, barging his shoulders into the surprisingly sturdy eggs as he went. So sturdy, in fact, that they were starting to hurt as he finally reached the end of the corridor. A entrance into another corridor on his left seemed to offer some hope. But as he stepped through, Gordon was forced to come to a literally crashing halt, slamming shoulder first as he looked back into an egg.

With a weary groan he pulled himself to his feet, rubbing his head as he looked at the obstacle in front of him. This corridor was significantly thinner than the one before, and left little to no room for negotiation around them. And the eggs were far too tall for him to reach.

A screech from behind made him instinctively duck his head, and he whirled around. The controller had made its' way around into the corridor, and another was slowly floating down from the ceiling to join him. Were they coming through the ventilation system, for God's sake?

Was there even a ventilation system?

Half a dozen globes of pure yellow energy shot towards him prodded him from his inward questioning. He dove forward, letting the blasts sizzle over him and impact on the egg behind him. Turning over so he was lying awkwardly on the Long Jump Module, Gordon aimed the shotgun up at the controllers and managed to blast one away while catching the other in the side of its' bulbous head with two shots.

A dull thumping distracted Gordon from following up the attack, and he looked to the egg. Part of the rock hard shell broke outwards, flying over his head and tapping quietly against the floor. A pink, fleshy stump moved into view, quickly managing to smash its' way out from the small hole. Before Gordon, towering over him and looking more than a little annoyed at being woken, an armoured alien - sans armour and the hornet weapon - started making its' way towards him.

Looking quite smug from where it floated above, the controller seemed content to watch as the alien lumbered towards Gordon. The scientist got to his feet and cocked the shotgun. He glanced up at the floating creature with an eyebrow raised in the best 'oh really?' expression he could manage. Returning his attention to the monster, he fired again and again into the monster, relentlessly firing and reloading until the weapon in his hands was empty. The pellets blew expansive yellow holes through the creature, puffs of yellow moisture spraying out onto the egg behind it as it stumbled back, grunting with every shot.

The controller above screeched again, and thrust its' hands together. But Gordon could only manage a grim smile as he looked back to

the fallen alien behind him, resting against the egg. Because now he had a stepping stone. Clambering up onto the body, Gordon managed to lever himself up onto the top of the egg. Struggling to his feet on the slippery surface, Gordon delicately hopped from one egg to the other as though he were using stepping stones to cross a raging torrent of a river.

Down below him on the right, Gordon saw an opening that he assumed would have been a doorway in normal circumstances. With the egg blocking it, through, it was more like a small, low-down window into a basement. Without checking first -always a bad idea, but he was being chased at the moment- Gordon slid down the gap between the egg and the doorway. It was something he knew the controller would have trouble doing, since its' head was far bigger than his body.

Looking up, the desperate smile quickly slid from his face. Two more controllers hovered above him, and another pair of electricity aliens on his right charged their attacks, ready to strike. Beside them, two eggs lay, somehow managing to be the most menacing things in the room.

Gordon whipped his eyes around, looking for an exit. One of the electricity aliens looked over its' shoulder as it charged its' blast, indicating three small open vents in the wall behind it. Red light glowed out from inside, contrasting heavily from the purples and blues permeating the room. However, Gordon didn't need any more encouragement, and ran straight for the openings. As he moved, Gordon quickly removed his Long Jump Module, the HEV suit's negative ping almost humorous.

He dove for the vent just as the Long Jump exploded against one of the controllers' energy blasts. Or at least, the bright yellow explosion indicated as much to Gordon. He slid instantly down to a lower level of the vent, and he started crawling, mindful of anything that could be following him.

Vents. It always came down to *vents.*

Although these ones *were* a bit… different. The warm, organic feel of the walls notwithstanding, some strange red spores floated in the air all around him, reminding him of how dust appeared when caught in a ray of sun, just on a larger scale. He continued crawling. Eventually, he came to a drop in front of him that led down to a display of purple walkway beneath.

Before continuing on, he loaded up the shotgun, using up all of the shells on the front of his ammunition belt. Once that was done, he slid the belt around so that the next helping was in front of him. With a deep breath, Gordon cocked the shotgun, and dropped down feet first into the room beyond.

This chamber far dwarfed any Gordon had seen before from this place. This time, at least half a dozen floors ran around the enormous, loosely cylindrical chamber. At each one, Gordon could see electricity aliens posted. His eyes continued to drift up, and almost at the very top of the structure, a portal floated, surrounded by a strange construct that rotated continually around its' axis.

Walkways on the upper floors stood next to several rotating, star shaped platforms, each of these elevators winding up a solid pole extending from the ceiling like a nut up a screw.

And controllers were descending. Three of them, from what Gordon could see.

Although it *was* after a pause, the electricity aliens still began charging their green attacks, although they seemed to take an inordinately long time to do so. The controllers, however, were nowhere near as inhibited, and launched a volley of glowing orbs down upon him. Gordon ran around the walkway, only just managing to keep ahead of the explosions as he circled the perimeter of the chamber.

He ended up in a small sheltered area, a ramp inside leading up to the next floor. An electricity alien there fired on him, but deliberately

missed. Gordon was starting to enjoy this treatment. He sprinted up the ramp and looked for his next way up.

Before him, a walkway extended out to the other side of the chamber. A pole beside the middle of the walkway quickly revealed a twirling platform, coming down from the floor above. An electricity alien was stood on it, and immediately began charging as Gordon walked towards it. He wasn't sure if he should be getting ready to duck of if he should just get on the platform.

A controller floating up beside him quickly answered *that* question. He fired blindly at the orbiting creature as he increased his pace. The platform began to corkscrew upwards just as he stepped onto it, and only the spindly yet surprisingly sturdy grip of the electricity alien on his wrist stopped him from falling into the foggy abyss below. He stared at the creature in wonder as they ascended, paying no mind to the screeches of the controllers as he reached his next destination.

When he saw two of them floating before him, he somehow wished he had been paying attention. He raised his shotgun when a blast of green electricity from beside him struck out, hitting the right-hand controller and impaling it all the way across the chamber and into the wall opposite. Its' brethren looked too stunned to do anything at first, but quickly recovered and turned towards the electricity creature beside Gordon.

It quickly grabbed Gordon by the arm and urged him onto the walkway in front of him. Gordon reluctantly started running to the next stop, but couldn't help looking back as the electricity alien closed its' eyes and bowed its' head before the controller. Then, with a furrowing of its' already fearsome brow, the controller did something that sent the creature screeching and spasm-ing off the platform and into the darkness below.

Gordon clenched his jaw, his grip on the shotgun tightening. He ran at the controller, which had since dedicated its' attention to him. It fired three blasts. Gordon ducked two and leapt over the last,

reaching out with his right hand to grab onto the spindly legs of the creature that dangled limply down.

With a pained screech, the creature dipped for a moment before ascending upwards to the only comrade it had left, a controller floating impatiently beside the portal. As it approached, continually screeching, the controller above prepared a blast and fired it off as they approached. It seemed to be heading straight for him, so Gordon waited. Then, just as the orb reached them, Gordon gave a good tug on the creature above him and then released it, managing to pull it down into the path of the yellow blast just as he dropped.

He landed on a thin walkway beside the final spiralling platform, his legs giving out beneath him from the sudden impact. He slid off the side and quickly wrapped his arms over the top. Down below, Gordon noticed that all alien eyes were on him, looking up at him in what he could only describe as silent hope.

Or prayer.

Gordon heaved himself up onto the platform, watching as the controller charged another blast, holding steadfast at its' post beside the portal. Whatever was through this gateway, it was important. And Gordon was willing to bet it was the 'single powerful being' he was here to greet.

The platform arrived, and, keeping his eyes on the creature, Gordon stepped back onto it. It spun him around, and with each turn he grew closer and closer to the portal. And as he ascended, each blast from the controller sailed down below him, destroying the pole beneath. So there was definitely no going back down.

Finally, the platform brought him to the top, overlooking the spinning portal device just a footstep before him. It also brought him shotgun to face with the creature beside it.

"Hello."

Gordon fired, sending the creature sailing down into the blackness with a trial of yellow blood filtering out behind it.

He knew he didn't have much time before the platform descended again automatically, so Gordon closed his eyes and stepped forward, letting himself fall.

With a flash of green and a sound akin to air rushing out of his ears, Gordon suddenly stepped out somewhere else. Somewhere very dark. And again, that long, droning voice echoed throughout his mind.

" *The last… time…"*

There was no sky. That was the first thing Gordon noticed. No mist, not purple clouds, no untraceable sources of light… nothing. Just blackness, all around. Even sound wasn't a factor here. His footfalls didn't make a noise. Gordon tried to speak. Nothing came out. Or at least, no sound came out. Because he was definitely still breathing.

He turned around to face the only source of light. A hellish stone construct, all pointed spikes and jagged edges sat in the middle of a rocky island ahead of him. In the very centre of the construct, held like it was precious gem on a pedestal, a red portal throbbed and shimmered. Even though everything he had learnt today seemed to indicate that red was bad, it seemed that it was his only way out. Between it and him, several more floating islands lay before him, the distance between them making it more a matter of using stepping stones than long jumping. Not that he could long jump if he wanted to.

Gordon slowly walked over, expecting one of the smaller stepping stones to fall away as he stepped on them, leaving him to float in nothingness for the rest of eternity as one last final joke from whatever had been playing with him for the past two days. But no sudden traps, no gunshots hitting him in the back and no aliens clawing at his suit. Just these islands… and the blackness around him.

Looking around, Gordon could see that there was *nothing* . Absolutely nothing but these islands. And, he remembered, looking back to the red energy before him, the portal.

He cautiously reached a hand out for it, somehow thinking that he would be able to feel anything negative if it was there.

" *Hurry up, Freeman! I can't keep it open forever!"*

Gordon quickly looked around. That sounded like… that was the scientist from the Lambda Core. Before he had a chance to question it, another voice came to him.

" *Freeman, yeah, I got that. You're becoming quite the legend around here."*

That was the security guard, Wilder. Gordon frowned. It sounded like the voices were coming from all around him. Cautiously, he moved his hand closer to the orb. And a flood of ghostly voices echoed around his mind.

" *Gordon Freeman. You've finally found us."*

" *This is the last entrance to the Lambda Complex-"*

" *And then you showed up, so it seemed like fate. Don't you think?"*

" *Bullshit. You give me that fucking weapon right now or I will blow your head right off, I swear to God."*

" *You'll have to sneak and fight your way from one end to the other."*

" *Remember we're down here, all right?"*

" *The government didn't do this!"*

" *Always wanted to do a John Woo."*

" *You've gotta believe me. I… there was nothing I could do…"*

" *Damn… you don't stop, do you?"*

" *You can trust them. You can trust all of us."*

" *Okay, Gordy. You're set to go! Good luck! I'll want to see her again, y'hear?"*

" *Coulda fooled me. You're a natural!"*

And finally, a far more familiar voice. Gentle, comforting, safe… Eli's voice.

" *Just be safe out there, all right?"*

With a gasp, Gordon breathlessly removed his hand and took a step back. He simply stood staring at the orb as he caught his breath. That was… that was the voices of everyone he had met since the accident. Well, perhaps not everyone, but there were enough unintelligible voices that Gordon was fairly sure they were all in there somewhere. Gordon wondered if the creature beyond was trying to deter him, to make him stop.

Unfortunately for it, all the voices did was make Gordon stronger.

He stepped up onto the pedestal, and into the red orb. Slowly, the world faded away, consumed by the same blackness that surrounded the islands.

Gordon's heart throbbed in his chest. It was time.

(A/N: Those quotes are all taken from different points in the story, going backwards to the first, most significant thing Gordon heard post-accident. If you *really* wanted to, you could go back through the story and find them, but seriously, just take my word for it. :)

Anyway, reviews are welcome as always!

Next Chapter: Worlds Collide)

Worlds Collide

-1Disclaimer: I don't own *Half-Life.*

The Black Mesa Incident

Chapter Thirty Six: Worlds Collide

The continuous, roaring noise of heavy machinery grew louder and louder as Shephard descended. He barely noticed it, his dull, reddened gaze set blankly forward as he waited for the elevator to finally come to a halt so he could move on. Eventually, the elevator stopped with a loud clang that only merged with the noise blasting into Shephard's eardrums.

Sniper rifle raised, he stepped into the storage unit. In the darkened room he could just barely make out the outline of stacked crates on his left-hand side, stretching forward a few feet before going off to the left to create a small 'corridor' of crates, huge walls of wooden boxes stacked on either side. Even further ahead of Shephard was another left turn after the other wall of crates. A shadow splayed across the floor brought Shephard's attention to the further turning, and he headed towards it.

The noise of the machinery roared on.

Shephard was suddenly whirled around as a bullet blasted into his left shoulder, turning him so that he was facing down the first 'corridor'. He swung the sniper rifle up to his eye as two more bullets hit him in the chest, sending him stumbling back towards the wall behind him. As Shephard watched, two more flashes lit up his otherwise concealed opponent, and he brought up the sniper rifle again, even as the bullets thanked against his leg and protected stomach.

He fired, and could barely see the spray of blood from the Black Ops' head as the high powered bullet flew through.

With his teeth clenched, Shephard turned and continued towards the corner, his eyes on the shadow that still lay there. Those bullets had managed to drain his PCV of quite a substantial amount of power; the wounds weren't healing as fast as they should, and the pain was nowhere near subsiding. Normally it would have been completely gone by now. He would have to be more careful.

Eventually limping to the corner, Shephard cocked the rifle and pressed his back to the wall of crates, safe in the knowledge that the heavy machinery would conceal *his* presence as well. The shadow still hadn't moved.

After one long breath, Shephard whirled around, rifle at the ready. A black, leather clad leg sprung out at him, hitting his hands and sending the rifle flying over his shoulder and clattering to the floor behind him. He didn't even bother to look back at the weapon, instead throwing his fist forward. With speed and grace that Shephard had only seen out of dancers, the Black Ops woman stepped to the right, letting the gloved first sail by.

Winding her arm around his, she drove her hand in a pincer-like fist into his throat. Shephard gagged as he tried to back up, his hand on his neck. The Black Ops whirled to the floor, swiping her legs through his ankles and sending him thumping painfully onto his back. As she came back up, Shephard thrust out a booted foot to where her face would end up being.

The leather collided with a satisfying solidity, the pained noise she made completely lost to the machinery. Wasting no time, Shephard struggled to his feet, which was no easy feat with a bullet hole in his thigh and another in his shoulder. Cautiously, she began to walk around him, suddenly aware that her new prey might be able to pose a threat. Shephard followed suit, circling around to the right while she followed. As he walked around, Shephard noticed for the first

time the opening between two walls of crates beside him, the 'corridor' facing opposite the wall he had just come from.

With a quick glance down it, Shephard saw large wooden crates placed onto metal braces, moving along a thick metal bar several feet above them. Every time they moved, they created the loud metal roar that he had been hearing ever since he descended down the elevator shaft. The crate blocking the 'corridor' ahead suddenly moved off to the right, revealing two Black Ops agents stood behind a mounted machinegun, their bodies almost completely hidden by the sandbag in front of him.

They noticed him instantly. Looking over at the Black Ops woman in front of him, Shephard threw his fist at her, half-guessing and half-hoping he knew what her response would be. She tossed up her forearm, blocking the blow. Shephard smiled and grabbed her wrist, tugging her towards him and finally swinging her around until she was between him and the now firing mounted machinegun. He leapt away as the bullets ripped through her like paper, streaking blood against the wall of crates behind her.

Shephard sat where he was for a moment, content to revel in the rush of survival for a few moments. He didn't let it linger, however. Survival instinct, mostly, but he also didn't want his brain kicking in anytime soon. Looking to the 'wall' in front of him, Shephard circled around and went to the body of the Black Ops woman he had shot earlier. Slotted neatly into her belt, two grenades beckoned him forth. He grabbed them both and walked back to the edge of the guarded 'corridor'.

He peeked around the corner. A crate was blocking his view of the Black Ops again. But they weren't what he was interested in right now anyway. Instead, he was studying the gap between the brace holding the crate and the metal floor below. Squeezing the grenade in his hand, he estimated that it was just about the right size. But to be on the safe side, Shephard waited for that crate to move on and for the next to slide into place before making his move.

Once the crate had groaned loudly into position, Shephard ripped the pins from both grenades and ran around the corner. He slid both into the gap underneath the crate before sprinting his way back around the corner, preparing his machete.

With a flash and a surprisingly audible bang, Shephard heard the grenades go off and whirled around the corner, charging through the smoking remains of the crate and into the little cubby-hole on the other side. He stepped over the charred remains of the first and foremost Black Ops, who no doubt had been manning the weapon. The second was backed up against the wall, dazed but still ready for action. Shephard charged him with the machete pointing downwards from his fist.

The Black Ops took aim with his rifle, but Shephard knocked it aside easily before slicing the machete through his neck with one swift motion. He didn't wait to see the fruits of his labours, settling for kicking his enemy's weapon away from him and going back down the 'corridor' to reclaim his own.

Finding no other way forward, Shephard went back to the moving grates and looked around. As one moved forward, Shephard could see a small gap of opportunity allowing him to slip diagonally through and into a metal-floored area beyond.

It *would* take some timing though, especially with a sizeable limp and boots that didn't particularly lend themselves the swift movements. After a few false starts, Shephard managed to quickly squeeze through as the crate before him very nearly crushed his foot clean off. Not allowing his relief to slow him down, Shephard heaved himself to his feet, using his rifle as a makeshift crutch for the act.

Before him was a platform high above his head, overlooking the area he stood in like an observation deck. A cargo elevator beside him yielded a way up, but Shephard kept a close eye on the floor above all the same. Keeping the rifle firmly gripped in both hands, Shephard elbowed the button to allow him to ascend, and waited nervously as it groaned and ached it's way up. The sound of the

machinery was beginning to fade, and other noises started making themselves known.

His own laboured breathing, for instance. That was something he could have done without, really. He sighed as he took in what was on this floor as well. More crates, again creating another corridor for him to wind his way through, except this was far narrower than any of the crate corridors he had come across before. With a grunt he limped onward, noting with some degree of satisfaction that his injuries weren't throbbing anywhere near as badly as they once were. Of course, that could just be some head injury talking, but what the hell. Right now, he honestly didn't give a shit about the state of his body. As long as he could kill whatever was thrown at him, the aesthetics didn't matter.

The sound of clanging footsteps stopped him as he approached the corner of the corridor, and he pressed his back to the metal crates. They became louder as the numerous soldiers approached. It was true that they could be some of the soldiers he would normally fight alongside, but right now, he didn't care who he hit. As long as he hit it.

He waited until the sounds were nigh-on beside him before stepping out, thrusting the butt of his rifle in the face of the first Black Ops. It connected with his nose with a resounding crack, knocking him back and onto his rear. Shephard whirled the rifle around and blasted holes in the heads of the two following soldiers, watching dispassionately as they crumpled. After another blast to the groaning soldier before him, Shephard continued forward down the corridor, the dim light precipitating the need for his IR goggles.

Eventually, the winding corridor yielded nothing but a dead end. However, some seemingly randomly placed crates showed him a way forwards. Or rather, upwards. After some awkward clambering, Shephard found himself atop the crate wall, limping along it with his sniper held up, ready for anything that could jump out of the numerous shadows. By the time he reached the end of the wall, he

was well and truly ready to relieve himself of the need to duck underneath the light fixtures.

The concrete walls had created a thin, very tall corridor ahead of Shephard, and on either side of him, a huge gaping passageway. The metal rack above him leading from one passageway to the other gave him the impression that these were for the transit of those large crates he had been fighting around earlier. Luckily, the entrance on the right-hand side was within jumping distance, and after a few tries that almost led to him tumbling to the metal floor far below, Shephard leapt into the 'corridor'.

Behind him, Shephard could see a crate blocking the other passageway. The way ahead of him, however, was clear, so he chose that path. He was overlooking a huge, expansive warehouse area, containers stacked up in random placements all around the room. A long metal rail led from just below the ledge of the passageway he stood on and all the way to the other side of the room. Two crates dangled precariously from the now inert rail, their braces creaking under the strain as they swung back and forth loosely. When the first crate swung towards him, it seemed to be just close enough for him to leap onto. Shephard sighed and cricked his neck.

Shephard was timing his jump when machinegun fire from below made him hit the cool, metal deck. But it wasn't at him. The whirring language of the Race X electricity aliens buzzed through the air, as well as the disgruntled cries of the tiger-striped creatures. Bullets and electricity blasts sang through the air, interrupting one another in a colossal argument of roaring voices.

He considered the situation. Three options were open to him. One, wait out the battle and kill whoever was left. Two, jump in with all guns blazing and fight his way through. Three, sneak his way past them as the two sides massacred each other. Normally, Shephard would have been happy to go with option One. But he had a nuclear bomb waiting to explode up his ass, so that was out. Two wouldn't work either. Even in the best of conditions he wouldn't last long

against such odds with just a sniper rifle, a machete blade and a wrench for company.

So, three seemed to be the magic number. With a resolved nod to no-one but himself, he decided to hop onto the crates in front of him and find a surreptitious way down. Hopefully he would be able to find an exit before someone (or some *thing*) spotted him and took objection. He slid the sniper rifle onto his shoulder and got to his feet. Taking a few steps back first - and trying to ignore the potentially off-putting explosions below - Shephard charged forward and leapt onto the crate as it swung towards him.

He hit it with a resounding thud that would have otherwise resonated loudly around the warehouse. As it was, the noise was barely audible. Not eager to make himself known to the masses below, Shephard scrambled up to the top of the crate, glaring in irritation at the sniper rifle that had slid off his shoulder and down his arm. It really was an awkward son of a bitch to lug around sometimes.

A outraged cry from one of the tank-sized tiger striped creatures didn't evoke much of a reaction from him. But when it repeated it in the exact same tone, Shephard couldn't help but peek over the side of the swinging crate. He swore at the sight below him. One of the creatures had indeed spotted him - annoying, since they had no eyes - and was charging a blast of purple energy.

It fired.

And all Shephard could think to do was stare at it and curse. Looking around, Shephard spotted two containers stacked atop each other that were just a few feet below him. He leapt for them as the blast sailed up behind him and annihilated the crate and the rack, sending them both crashing to the ground. Shephard barely managed to claw his fingers onto the edge of the container. Looking down, he saw the same alien staring up at him, waiting for its' prey to drop.

A little further up and close to his dangling feet, Shephard could see that the containers were not perfectly stacked; there was a small

shelf that he could balance his boots on, at least until he dropped down to the floor below. Concentrating on the jump and not on the monster waiting to feast on his bones, Shephard dropped to the ledge and quickly bounced himself back, turning in mid-air and rolling to the solid ground below.

That familiar heavy galloping thudded away behind him, and Shephard looked over his shoulder to see the creature stood above him, claws held high to strike. Shephard rolled, pulling up the sniper rifle as he came to a kneeling stance. The grenade that dropped down below the creature's belly made him reconsider his strategy, however. He turned and ran, the surprisingly quick explosion knocking him off his feet, tossing him through the air and into the side of another container on the other side of the room.

He bounced once against the thick metal, denting it before he hit the ground with a quiet thud. The sniper rifle was knocked from his grip by the impact, and Shephard extended a groggy hand out to take it. A black boot clomped down the rifle, and Shephard looked up at the Black Ops soldier now staring down at him, rifle pointed straight for his head. Shephard prepared to kick him in the side.

A flash of blue-white light hit the Black Ops in the side, sending him stumbling back with a grunt before he turned to face his attacker. The Race X electricity alien fired again, this time hitting the soldier in the face and sending him spiralling through the air and onto his front again. Looking down across the room at his would-be saviour, Shephard watched as the creature stamped over to his still slightly dazed form, lifting its' leg to stamp down on his head.

Looking up, Shephard saw another electricity alien approaching. Remembering an old trick, he rolled out of the way of the descending alien foot before rising to his feet and grabbing the grey tendrils that dangled from the creature's mouth. He yanked down on them, hard, pulling himself up by using the alien's knee as a step. Pushing off from the creature with his legs, he whirled around and scythed his leg through the air, hitting the alien behind him in the side of the face and sending it stumbling back, turning as it did so.

Shephard landing beside his sniper rifle and snatched it up. With a quick roll, he put some distance between himself and the two aliens, taking both out with one bullet each. The roach creatures they carried were easily dispatched by the butt of his rifle and his boot, respectively.

Getting to his feet, Shephard couldn't hear anymore noises of battle. It seemed that they had killed each other off. And while he would usually err on the side of caution and sweep the area just in case, he had a bomb to get away from. Rifle now empty, Shephard explored the room, the distant sound of industrial machinery echoing around him as he walked. At the far end of the room and around two stacked containers, Shephard found a car sized entrance to another room, the floor ramped upwards and leading to a large, secure looking door on the right-hand side.

Slowly, and with his rifle futilely held high, Shephard edged forward. When he got within a few paces distance of the door, it slid open with a mighty groan. Shephard brought the rifle to his eye, in another pointless gesture. Inside, a haggard looking security guard with messy stubble and an oily streak on one side of his face waved him in. He was leaning against the wall beside the doorway.

"I guess you're a good guy," His brown eyes flicked down to Shephard's nametag, "Corporal." He swallowed loudly between deep breaths. "Listen, you've got to get down below," he continued, jabbing his thumb over his shoulder. Inside the room beyond, Shephard could see some shelves on the far and left-hand walls. On the right, in the far corner, an open elevator beckoned him forth.

The security guard continued. "There's something coming through, and it's the nastiest looking thing yet. Some of your buddies went down there awhile ago and I haven't seen them since. I've got some weapons I've piled up in here; you'd better take as much as you can carry… because I think this is it."

Shephard walked into the room, staring at the elevator. He didn't know if there was a way out down there. It could just be a dead end.

"Good luck, Corporal."

A clean, crisp gunshot ran through the air, making Shephard instinctively whirl around. The security guard lay dead against the wall, blood streaking down behind him from where he had been stood. In the large doorway, a Black Ops stood, standard issue handgun pointed at his face. He gestured for Shephard to drop the weapon. His teeth gritted, Shephard did so, tossing it to the ground beside him.

Slowly, the Black Ops walked into the room, keeping the pistol aimed firmly at Shephard. When he got too close for comfort, Shephard backed up so that his back was to the shelves on the far side of the room and the glowing elevator was on his left. At a lack of options, Shephard tried something new. Something he hadn't tried since he arrived.

Talking.

"Did you hear what he said?"

The Black Ops paused, tilting his head to the side like a curious dog. Then he threw his weapon away, sending it careening across the room and rattling to a stop beside the corpse of the security guard.

Shephard frowned in confusion. "What the hell are you doing? Didn't you hear him? There's something coming in down there. Something that could kill us all."

His mute, shadowy opponent started circling him, and Shephard cautiously did the same, keeping distance between them. The elevator was on his right now, with the shelves behind the Black Ops.

"This doesn't matter anymore!" he screamed. "None of it! What the fuck's the point?"

As if in answer, the Black Ops threw a jab of a punch at him. Shephard leant back to avoid the blow, and instinctively responded with an attack of his own, swinging his right arm around. His opponent easily blocked the attack and shoved his free palm up into Shephard's face. The lenses of his mask cracked as the breath nozzle on the front drove itself up into his face. His IR goggles flashed on and off angrily as he stumbled back, finally settling for off.

Blinking away the spots in front of his eyes, Shephard looked up in time to see the Black Ops coming at him with another punch to the face. Shephard ducked beneath the blow and charged straight into him like a bull, grabbing onto his sides and driving the Black Ops back into the hard metal shelves behind him. Both groaned noisily as they collided with the shelves, random supplies toppling and clattering to the ground. A solid hit to the back of his neck made Shephard back up, and barely felt two hands on either side of his head before it was driven down into the Black Ops' knee, sending the gasmask smashing into his face once again before tossing him onto his back like a spent weapon.

Shephard just stared up at the ceiling as he breathed, the pain in his face suddenly awakening him from the numbness he had been feeling since he had watched the G-Man re-activating the nuclear bomb.

The light above his head was suddenly blocked by the figure of the Black Ops, and he watched as he lifted his boot and sent it slamming down towards his face. With a sudden burst of energy that he hadn't felt in some time, Shephard reached up and grabbed the foot, twisting it viciously and throwing it away. The Black Ops, equally surprised, backed up as Shephard heaved himself to his feet.

Like a boxer on a roll, Shephard charged at the Black Ops, his blur of a right hook connecting with a satisfying crack against his jaw. The left blow was blocked, and two more after were dodged with frustrating efficiency and ease. He sidestepped another blow, this time grabbing onto Shephard's arm and turning, rolling Shephard

over his shoulder and again onto his back. He repeated his gesture from before and made to stamp on his head.

Shephard rolled out of the way, his hand slipping his wrench from his belt as though he had never forgotten it was there. Swinging it around, he cracked it into the Black Ops' knee, sending him screaming onto his back with a surprising volume. As he watched the faceless enemy writhe on the floor, he felt an overwhelming surge of hatred boil out of him. How dare these… *things* object to pain? As if they were human beings that hadn't killed and maimed and tortured.

His grip on the wrench tightened.

These… bastards…

" *WHAT'S THE FUCKING POINT!?"* he screamed, swinging the wrench high above his head before he brought it back down on the Black Ops head, silencing him instantly.

Another hit.

Another.

And another.

Blood spattered against the floor and the walls, completely coating the silver tip of the wrench and sending little droplets flying up into his cracked lenses.

Finally, Shephard stopped, kneeling beside his handiwork in a haze of bloodlust. He stared down at the mangled body before him, the frayed lenses turning him into a multiple image in front of his very eyes. Slowly, Shephard got to his feet, the blood dripping from the wrench that dangled idly from his side.

He let it drop with a clang. He didn't feel like carrying it anymore.

Shephard pulled off his gasmask to remove the lenses, but ended up closing his eyes and simply letting the cool air waft onto his face. He hadn't done this since…

Since just before he met Gordon Freeman. So many people had just died before his eyes… Parker, Robbins, Jetson…

His eyes snapped open when he saw the faces of the dead swirling in the darkness. He shook his head, and, after stabbing the lenses out with his machete, replaced the gasmask on his face. It felt strange to not to have them. Like he was unprotected somehow. All it really meant was that he was even more likely do die from a shot to the head than before. Which wasn't much.

He picked up his sniper rifle and took what little ammunition for it he could find on the shelves. Five bullets. The only supplies those bastard soldiers had left him before going off into battle were five bullets. He loaded them up as he stepped into the elevator. With a gently push of his elbow, the pushed the button that would allow him to descend to the floor below. His exposed icy blue eyes remained on the dead Black Ops until he was well and truly out of sight.

The steady groaning of the freight elevator was gradually accompanied by a noise from below, like a constant whistling breeze. As he entered the floor below, he suddenly felt it too, almost being blown from his feet by the gusts that buffeted against him. Behind him and on the walls on either side of him, thick metal grates of epic proportions hid - he assumed - equally epic fans, their blades groaning rustily against the wind they were blowing out.

Looking ahead through squinting eyes, Shephard spotted his next destination. At the far end of the large room was a stairway leading down to a level below that he could see from where he was. Being mindful of the crates that were steadily being blown his way, Shephard fought against the wind and made his way to the stairs.

A sparkle of light flew past his head, quickly followed by several more. His eyes instantly going to them, he watched as they whirled

haphazardly yet with a strange grace towards a metal door in the far left-hand corner of the bare floor below. They disappeared through it as though it weren't even there.

Shephard walked to the door, and, with his heart beating and stomach tingling far more than it had for any other battle in his life, Shephard hit the button beside it. The door slid open, revealing another greying room behind. As he stepped inside, he saw the walkway above him running around the room. The ladder that he assumed would have usually led up there was now half encased in brilliant luminescent green moss, glowing in an otherworldly way that didn't endear itself to Shephard.

In the far right of the room, Shephard saw another doorway leading into what felt like a much larger chamber, judging by the draft. He stepped through, and had to stop himself from doing a double-take. The room was huge. Both vertically and horizontally. He was standing on a T shaped walkway that itself stood above a black void below. Shephard didn't even want to think about how far down the actual floor was. Above his head, a walkway running against the near wall led to the walkway in the room behind him.

On the other opposite side of the T, a thick yellow tower had been erected, a walkway running around that, too. At the far end of each walkway, Shephard could see some kind of mounted weapon, pointing towards what had become the centrepiece of the room at the bottom of the 'T'. Shephard slowly walked towards the pulsating purple mass that had encompassed the wall there, towering above him like a skyscraper. The same green moss from the other room created a glowing border around it, like a sacred gateway for… something. The moss had spread out until it came to the very edge of the bottom of the 'T' walkway.

A flash of purple filled his vision, and the noise of thunder rolled through the air. The portal before him stretched and pushed out towards him, and he backed up accordingly, sniper rifle at the ready. Another flash, and another ominous thunderclap that echoed all around the room.

Several more followed in quick succession, and Shephard backed all the way back onto the metal of the walkway.

One more flash and a resounding bang of thunder, and, as though being born, a towering, writhing green monster came grunting and roaring from the portal, pulling and stretching the glowing purple gateway around it as it finally entered the world. Two large green tentacles swung around wildly in the air as it roared its' beaked face to the heavens, several smaller tentacles on each side wriggling around beneath their two larger cousins. Two glowing yellow eyes on either side of the shining, black beak took in the world around them.

And the creature didn't seem to like it. Its' gaze fell to Shephard, and he took aim. Not that he needed to; the thing was as big as a house, literally. He managed to fire off one shot that pinged helplessly against the creature's green hide before one of the large tentacles came swinging down, swatting him back dismissively. Shephard barely managed to hold onto the sniper rifle as he toppled back along the walkway, finally hitting a guardrail at the bridge of the 'T'.

Still sitting, he cocked the sniper rifle and took aim again, this time going for something a little more tangible. With all the creature's writhing, it wasn't an easy task getting a lock on the right eye. But years of training wasn't just for show. The high powered bullet punctured the eye like a balloon, and the creature clenched its' eyelid shut, the pale green making it look like a rotten grape. Still with one good eye roaming the room, it settled on Shephard.

With a roar, the creature rose its' beak up the ceiling before bringing its' head back down. A vortex of green energy spiralled towards him from the creature, and Shephard had no desire to be caught by it. Scrambling to his feet, he managed to sprint his way behind the yellow platform on the left. Breathlessly falling to the floor, he looked at the section of the walkway where he had just been. Melted, like acid.

Taking a deep breath, he cocked the sniper rifle again and whirled around the corner of the yellow tower. Within a few seconds, he took

out the other eye, and the creature was blinded. It roared again, but this time it slammed its' tentacles down on the ground again and again, like a child having a tantrum. The room shook from the blows.

Then, something in the creature's belly attracted Shephard's attention; it was opening up. A purple orb of energy inside the small cavity was almost instant encouragement for him. He fired a high powered bullet firmly into the gaping wound, and the orb flashed angrily. And the creature roared, striking out at everything it could find. Whatever Shephard had just shot, it was certainly important.

He watched as the creature writhed yet more. Then, suddenly, it stopped, taking on an almost Zen-like calm before concentrating its' tentacles on the open wound. With a quick flourish, a golden orb of a portal blasted out, floating to a halt halfway down the walkway in front of it. It disappeared with a flash, revealing a Race X electricity alien in its' wake. Shephard wasted no time in taking aim and using his last bullet to blast a hole in the creature's head.

It collapsed onto its' back with a thud, and Shephard swatted the roach creature that remained away and down into the darkness below with the back of his hand. He had bigger alien killing machines to fry now. Looking around, he noticed the crystal gun on the walkway opposite him on the second floor, and remembered there was also one on the walkway above him.

Shephard latched onto the ladder on the yellow tower beside him and climbed up top. After a quick check to see what the creature was doing, he made his way around to the weapon. It basically looked like a box with two handles on one end and a nozzle on the other. A yellow crystal jutted out of the top, and Shephard hazarded a guess that they were alien in origin as well.

Two red buttons on top of the handles indicated how the thing worked, and Shephard took aim at the steadily recovering creature. Where once its' swollen eyes were clamped shut, they were now cautiously opening again, the yellow irises flicking around the room for some kind of safety.

Shephard clicked down his thumbs and fired a blast of golden energy into the creature's eye. Yellow blood exploded outwards, and the creature screamed with even more intensity than before. Whirling its' head around towards him, it brought its' head up again to unleash another blast of acid breath. Shephard ran for the guardrail of the walkway and stepped up onto it, leaping for the walkway opposite just as the creature fired. He slammed into the guardrail of the walkway chest first, his arms clamping over it like hooks.

The creature had followed his little leap, and was preparing another blast. Shephard swung his legs through the gap of the guardrail and slid his way around onto the walkway. He grabbed the crystal gun and fired at the remaining eye just as the creature unleashed another spiralling green attack. The blast was sent off course by the crystal gun, but not by much. It melted the support struts beneath Shephard's walkway, sending it toppling back and leaving a rather dangerous looking ramp leading down into the blackness beyond.

He grabbed turned and ran down the ramp, pushing off before it became vertical and landing rather hard on the top of the 'T' shaped walkway. As he heard the crackle of another portal releasing an electricity alien, Shephard dashed around and into the room beyond, taking cover. He stood with his back to the wall, his head leaning up against it as he stared at the ceiling. All of the aches and pains of the day previous were catching up with him. The PCV was now officially out of power.

There was nothing left.

"Fuck," he breathed.

Then, with another deep breath, he poked his head around the corner. Another electricity alien had indeed been released, and was standing directly in the way of Shephard and the creature. Not that he wanted to get close to it right now. All he had left to fight it were the crystal guns, and they were both…

Shephard's eye fell on something in the rubble of the yellow tower. There, just before the green monster that had been terrorising him, a crystal gun poked out of the debris. Almost like a game of join-the-dots, it was placed almost precisely in front of the now open orifice of the creature where the purple orb glowed.

He tucked himself around the corner again and took several more breaths, hoping that each one would increase his resolve. Instead, they just made him want to turn back. Shephard reached down and pulled out his machete.

This was for every good person he had met today.

Every security guard, scientist or soldier who didn't know the horror of what was around them, but ended up dying for it anyway.

Shephard charged roaring around the corner, using the pain that tore at him to power his rage. The electricity alien fired on him, hitting him in the shoulder. All it did was make Shephard turn a little. But he still kept coming. As he reached the alien, he plunged the machete into its' eye. With a cry, it brought up its' clawed hands to the weapon now lodged in its' face. Shephard pulled it out before it had a chance to anything of the sort, quickly whirling around with it and stabbing it into the creature's muscled, hunched back.

Shephard left the blade where it was and ignored the creature's pained cries as he dove for the crystal gun. Everything else in the room was secondary. Including the tentacle that came smashing down on his left leg as he reached the crystal weapon, breaking it instantly. Shephard roared in agony as he pressed the buttons on the weapon, sending a continuous burst of pure golden energy into the purple heart of the monster.

Finally, the purple orb started to crackle and pulsate wildly, sending cracks of light shooting up the screaming creature. Purple light shone through, breaking out as though through cracks in a wall. The creature lashed out at everything in the room, and the chamber began to crumble. A titanic limb thrashed out at a pillar that ran all

along the wall beside Shephard, dislodging it. With a slow rumble, it began to topple down on him.

With the smile of a man finally at peace, Shephard closed his eyes and welcomed death. He had seen so much… had so much of his life shown back to him as a lie, a, dirty filthy lie… everything he had believed in and fought for… none of it true.

Yes, he welcomed death now.

But the sudden impact never came.

And the roaring of the creature was gone, replaced instead by a noise Shephard had once found comforting and safe; the blades of an Osprey helicopter, chugging away melodiously.

Shephard opened his eyes and found himself in the same helicopter he had first ridden to the Black Mesa Facility, sitting in his usual bench. Outside, the rocky mountains of New Mexico flew swiftly past.

And, stood before him, smiling down like a condescending teacher, the G-Man, his briefcase by his side. He opened his mouth, and a deep, slithering voice oozed out.

"So, Corporal Shephard, we meet *at last.* Please, don't think that I've been… avoiding you, a great many matters require my *attention* in these… troubled times." He smiled falsely. "I do hope you understand." He took a sudden, choked breath, sounding like he had just swallowed something unpleasant. "And… now I require a further indulgence, on your part. I cannot *close* my report until every loose end has been tied up."

That was something Shephard understood quickly. Loose ends… like those the military had been slaughtering. His fellow soldiers, turned into heartless, mindless killers because of this… bastard standing before him.

"The biggest embarrassment has been… Black Mesa Facility, but I think that's finally taken care of, itself."

He spoke in a disjointed, unfamiliar manner. But his words were all so well pronounced, it wasn't like he was foreign. It was like he had the dictionary, but none of the grammar.

A gradual flash of white light blinded Shephard, the distant rumble of an explosion still managing to make his ears ring from this distance. His eyes widened as he realised exactly what that was.

The G-Man smiled.

"Quite so."

Shephard couldn't find the will to speak. They were all gone. Everyone he had met, everyone he had saved and spared and seen… all of them, burnt to nothing.

With another blinding flash and the sound of a teleportation, the Osprey suddenly found itself surrounded by green sky. The occasional small, floating island drifted past. But Shephard wasn't interested in that. He was only concerned with the murdering scum in front of him.

As hard as he tried to stand up, however, he couldn't. It was as though his body simply didn't want to function. He couldn't even clench a fist or wriggle his toes. All he could do was move his head, and even that seemed to take the greatest of efforts.

Either the G-Man didn't know or didn't care about his predicament, because he simply continued on. "But *there* is still the *linger* ing matter of… wit *ness* es. I admit I have a fascination with those who *adapt* and *survive* against all odds…" He smiled. "They rather remind me of myself."

The way he smiled, it was like he knew that Shephard would want to kill him for the comment. This bastard was fully aware of Shephard's

immobility.

"If for no *other* reason, I have argued to preserve you, for a *time* . While I believe a civil servant like yourself understands the importance of… discretion, my employers are not quite so trusting, and, rather than continually subject you to the irresistible human temptation of *telling all*, we've decided to…" He paused to swallowed loudly, "… *convey* you somewhere you can do no possible harm… and where no harm can come to you."

The door to the cockpit slid open, revealing a pulsating green portal inside. The G-Man nodded to Shephard with the slightest tip of his head, and moved towards the portal. He stopped and turned halfway, looking to Shephard.

"I'm sure you can imagine there are worse… alternatives."

With the barest of smiles, he turned, straightened his tie, and walked into the portal.

And with a flash, he was gone.

Shephard stared after him, waiting for the portal to close or for the door to slide shut. Or for his arms to suddenly gain the ability to move. But… nothing. Just nothing.

The wind blew gently outside, filling the barren alien wasteland around him. Shephard tried to move again. The portal stayed where it was. That was it. The struggling, the endless fighting and death that had surrounded him, that he had crawled, shot and blasted his way through… all of it, so he could be left here to float in silent nothingness. Left to drift for all time.

Slowly, Shephard bowed his head, eyes closed. His voice was somewhere between a croak and a whisper as he spoke.

"Please… just let me die…"

His final words disappeared into the green void around him.

The Osprey floated silently on.

(A/N: As hard as I try, I genuinely can't believe I'm nearly at the end of this story. It's been a long project, and I can't honestly say it hasn't had its' downs. But anyway, that's an author note for another chapter. Next chapter, to be precise. :P

Anyway, I'm sure there are people who have opinions on how I've conveyed the end (so far) of Shephard's journey. So review, and let me know!

Next Chapter: Nihilanth)

Nihilanth

-1Disclaimer: I don't own *Half-Life.*

The Black Mesa Incident

Chapter Thirty Seven: Nihilanth

" *FREEMAN…"*

The booming, drawled voice echoed around his head, bouncing all around the walls of the darkened chamber around him.

And there, floating in front of him and staring straight at him with hollow, black eyes and a wrinkly, nose-less face, was the creature he was here to kill. It resembled the controller creatures, just on a huge, grand scale. Its' pale grey skin reflected the sparkling energy of the spots of energy orbiting it. A platform made of technology Gordon would probably never be able to understand supported its' legless, fleshy torso, letting it float high above the ground below.

The chamber itself was cylindrical and much bigger than anything Gordon had seen in Xen or on Earth. Looking down below, Gordon realised what it reminded him of.

It was an arena.

He was stood on an outcropping of rock roughly parallel with the creature, and he didn't even notice the cracks growing along its' surface until the monster spread its' lamppost length arms out to either side, using a wave of telekinetic energy to crush whatever was keeping the platform together. And so Gordon tumbled down into the chasm below, the barely visible watery pit so very far below him rushing up to meet him.

Several spikes grew out of the grey-green liquid, set at an angle in seemingly random places that Gordon was sure were set out for a

very specific purpose. As he approached one of the spikes, he noticed its' flat surface and adjusted his fall accordingly. With an awkward twist in midair, Gordon managed to hit the side of the spike with his back, sliding down it and into the murky water below. It splashed around and over him as he landed, and he skidded for a few metres before he got control of his momentum.

He got to his feet, and noted that the ground below the water was surprisingly hard, considering that hitting it at speed hadn't hurt him at all. In fact, sliding down the spike was more uncomfortable than hitting the ground.

Bright lights cast a deep shadow behind him, and Gordon looked up. Three of the energy orbs that the controllers used were flying towards him. Except these were as big as monster truck tyres. And almost twice as fast as the ones the controllers fired off.

So Gordon started running, shotgun in hand. One of the orbs landed directly behind him, the blast lurching him forward off his feet and face-first into the ankle high water beneath him. Gordon managed to turn the fall into a forward roll and was quickly on his feet again, running ahead of the next two blasts. The next hit the ground just between his legs, propelling him up into the air but still managing to make him travel forwards.

He grasped his glasses with one hand as he gripped the shotgun tightly with the other, and scrunched his eyes shut as he hit the wall with a thud, bouncing back and splashing down in the water. Gordon blinked a few times before he realised there was a third blast coming his way and scrambled to his feet. Squinting as he tried to see past the droplets of water that had gathered on his glasses, Gordon spotted another spike just a few feet away.

With a dive forward that he was sure looked more action hero-like than he was feeling, Gordon tucked himself behind the angular shape, waiting for the blast to come as the light shining around the structure intensified. And then, with the barest of crackling static, the light disappeared. With a cautious frown, Gordon peeked around the

spike and saw only the smallest of burn marks. He looked around the dark chamber, confounded. This was a very strange place.

But then his eyes settled on something else beside the spike. It was one of the pink, fleshy trampolines he had encountered back at Black Mesa. Now, he was no expert on pink fleshy trampolines, but Gordon imagined that if he leapt onto it with sufficient force, it would be able to take him up to the menacing creature glaring down at him. After a few checks at the offending monster, he saw that it was simply watching him, waiting for whatever he was going to do next. Maybe it needed time to charge its' attacks, since they were so damned big.

With a shrug, Gordon just sprinted for it, kicking up frothy splashes of water as his feet thumped against the solid ground beneath. He jumped up and landed on the trampoline dead centre, and, with the customary inflating noise, it sent Gordon tumbling up into the air, and far higher than he had initially anticipated. Gordon managed to keep a grip on his glasses as he peaked just above the creature and then started falling again.

He whipped the shotgun up and fired again and again into the creature's bulbous visage. With some measure of satisfaction, he saw huge bursts of green-yellow blood spew forth, leaking out into the watery it below. But then, as Gordon spent the last shell of the shotgun, he saw something that wasn't quite so welcome. Flickering lines of golden electricity came from three corners of the chamber around the creature. Gordon followed the energy to its' source; three huge, truck sized golden crystals, the same kind…

The same kind that had started everything. And they were feeding this creature. The wounds he had inflicted on the creature healed almost instantaneously. Gordon's amazement held until he realised he was quite far below the creature now, and almost certainly about to impact nastily on the ground below. Looking around below him, he saw another of the trampolines just a few relative inches to his right. Swinging the shotgun around, he managed to twist his body in mid-air until he was fairly sure he would hit the trampoline.

With barely a whisper, the revolver in Gordon's hip holster slipped out and tumbled to the ground, disappearing in the grey liquid. Gordon bit back a quiet curse, and comforted himself that he still had the shotgun. As long as he had the shotgun, he would be okay.

It turned out, much to Gordon's dismay, that he hadn't positioned himself particularly well over the trampoline, and only found his legs being pushed back up by the nigh-on clairvoyant machine, which seemed to detect him coming. Gordon was sent twirling forward, the shotgun tumbling out of his hands and his glasses very nearly going the same way. But random flailing of ones' arms seemed to do the trick every now and again and Gordon managed to save his eyesight, at least for now.

He landed rather ungracefully in the water in a sitting position, kicking up another wave of water that seemed to spread quietly out to all side of the cylindrical chamber. Gordon was fairly sure he had bruised his rear with that little number. His gaze travelled up to the monster above him. Very slowly, it spread its' arm out in a spread eagle position, gradually bringing them together in a technique that Gordon knew precipitated explosions and pain.

Looking down, he took stock of what he had left. Two grenades, some shotgun shells, and a crowbar. And he *really* didn't have time to go looking for his guns. He looked first to a third trampoline, then to the crystal growing out of the wall high above it, level with the monster.

He still had two grenades and a crowbar.

That was enough.

Gordon heaved himself to his feet and sprinted to the trampoline, using his knowledge of physics to at least *try* and predict how best to reach the glowing crystalline mass above him. With a loud gust of air, it delivered him diagonally up and towards the crystal. As he approached it faster than Superman, Gordon started to become a little wary of the golden energy that seemed to be constantly

coursing through it. Would that interfere with his suit? As the thought occurred to him, he flew up just above the crystal, and he instinctively latched out to grab onto it.

Nothing happened. No massive electric shock, no warning beep from his suit. That was good. He swung his legs over and straddled the larger outcropping of the crystal. Reaching to the belt around his waist, Gordon yanked out a grenade and pulled the pin, wedging it between two spiky growths. Wasting no time, he pushed himself to the side and kicked off with his legs, diving away from the crystal and down into the murk.

He was halfway there when the grenade exploded, the resounding bang only barely topped by the shattering noise from the crystal. Suddenly there was less light in the room, and Gordon couldn't really see where he was going. With a quick movement of his hand he flicked on the flashlight. He had been aiming to hit the trampoline before the lights had been switched off, and it looked like he was still heading there.

This time, it was a much more graceful landing, the trampoline quickly slowing his ascent and merely popping him a few inches into the air, allowing him to leap down onto the ground with barely a grunt.

He frowned as his shadow was suddenly cast along the water again, but this time by something of a luminescent green. Gordon turned and saw a portal bearing down on him.

This thing could make *portals?*

But then again, it only stood to reason. This thing was keeping a portal open that was big enough to allow an invasion through, so obviously it would be able to manage some comparatively little things. Gordon, however, had no desire to find out what hell awaited him on the other side of that portal, and started running towards a spike.

The ominous hum of the portal increased as grew ever closer to him, the green glow practically bathing him as he checked over his shoulder to see where it was. It was nipping at his heels. And, as if the speed weren't enough, it seemed to be following him. Gordon finally reached the spike he needed and ducked around the corner.

With a bright green flash that made Gordon crush his eyes shut, the portal noise vanished. Slowly, Gordon opened one eye, then the other, confident that he would be someplace else.

But he was still in the chamber. Looking around, Gordon turned to see that half the spike had promptly disappeared, taken by the portal to some death-trap from which there was no escape. With a desperate smile, he looked up at the monster before noting his next glimmering target.

There was no trampoline beneath this one, but a fairly hefty run up to the one closest quickly fixed that problem, sending him spiralling haphazardly through the air and perilously close to the creature's arms. Fortunately, the pale limbs were far too slow and lumbering to even touch him, and Gordon was soon sliding to a halt atop the crystal, the back of his head banging against the wall as he stopped.

Hissing, he rubbed the back of his head as he pulled out the last grenade and pulled the pin with his teeth. It came out with surprising ease, and Gordon jammed it between two shards below his feet. He ran and leapt out into the void, the explosion knocking him a little off course. Not that he *had* a course this time round. Gordon tumbled, his arms and legs scrambling around futilely in the air as he fell. The light from the crystal vanished, plunging the two enemies into almost darkness, the only vision they had provided by the warm glow of the last crystal.

But that didn't really matter now, because the great Gordon Freeman, saviour of the world, was about to go splat in a pit of grey, stinking water.

Gordon landed with a splash. That was all, just a splash. No thud, no crack… it felt as though he had just fell off a diving board into a swimming pool. And a low down diving board at that. He instantly sat up, surprised to find that his glasses were merely tilted at a slight angle on his face from the drop. His gaze fell down to the water below him, and he ran his fingers along the ground beneath. It *felt* solid enough, and when he pressed down on it there was next to no give.

Very odd, for sure. But not something he was about to complain about. Slapping his hand down on his knee, Gordon hefted himself to his feet and looked up at the floating monster above him. Two energy globes bore down on him at incredibly frightening speeds, and Gordon ran. The first hit directly behind him, tossing him into the air and skidding along the watery ground. The next shot straight down at his head, and Gordon barely rolled out of the way before the back of his HEV suit took the brunt of explosion, the force of the blast still throwing him along the ground and into the wall.

Gordon blinked as he tried to sit up. The stats in front of his eyes were flickering madly, but he could just make out that they weren't inspiring. Xen had taken its' toll on the Mark IV Hazard Suit. Ironically, it was probably designed for use in an alien world in the first place.

He shook his head and pushed his way to his feet, pressing his palms against the scaly wall behind him for support. Looking up, he saw the crystal directly above him, and a trampoline beside him. With a crick of his neck, Gordon ran to the device and leapt onto it.

He had no guns, no grenades, and no HEV suit. But he had a crowbar and his brain.

And for Gordon Freeman, those two were all he needed.

With a mighty rush of stale air, the trampoline inflated and sent him rocketing up into the sky, his short hair fluttering as he ascended up past the monster he had come to slay. It rubbed its' hands together,

the deadly glow emanating from between them casting itself onto Gordon menacingly.

He reached the side of the crystal and used his crowbar to hook onto a smaller shard poking out the side. With a grunt and a mighty pull of his skinny, not-muscular-at-all arms, Gordon hefted himself up onto the crystal and stood atop it. He stood right at the back of the placement, the point of the crystal extending out in front of him and poking straight towards his enemy.

Like the yellow brick road. Gordon smiled.

The monster unleashed its' attack, and Gordon started running. He leapt forward, his booted feet burning as they were only just caught in the aura of the orb. The blast hit the crystal behind Gordon, shattering it. The entire chamber shook around them, and Gordon continued to plummet down onto the bulbous, smooth head of his enemy.

Then, like a blooming flower, the head opened, suddenly filling the pitch black chamber with a brilliant white light. The head had split into four equal 'petals', and Gordon managed to grasp onto the far one to stop his fall into the now invisible watery pit below. Gordon pulled himself inside and stared at the glowing orb in wonder.

It was a portal. This creature's brain… was a portal.

Gordon grasped the crowbar, the long end downwards, and lifted it above his head, ready to plunge it down.

And suddenly, Gordon knew.

He knew of the Nihilanth, the last of a once great race, enslaved and then forced to flee from its' home by an even greater power… Shu'ulathoi.

" *Their slaves, we are their slaves, we are…"*

Forced to flee to the no-place, the world between worlds, enslaving those once in service to the Shu'ulathoi. And then others came, taking the lights with them to another world… a better, stronger world. And so, desperate, the mighty Nihilanth decided to take this new place as its' own. Until another came. One who knew the trials of surviving at all costs.

" *The last, you are the last, you are…"*

This thing was just like him. It had done terrible things… it had inflicted so much horror and death… all in the name of survival.

And so, Gordon had one reason to spare the Nihilanth.

But he had well over twenty to go through with it. And most of them were dead.

Gordon plunged the crowbar down into the Nihilanth's head, and didn't stop until only the hook remained, poking out of the top. The monstrous thing below him bellowed in pain, the floating device holding it aloft buckling from the sudden strain and tipping Gordon off. He toppled down into the blackness below. With a splash, he landed down in the water, his arm finding something hard beneath the water. He felt around and pulled out the shotgun.

A sudden light from above drew Gordon's attention up, and he watched the Nihilanth shake spasmodically as it gradually turned around, green energy blasting out from the top of its' open, exposed head. Gordon started rapidly loading his shotgun, although he had no idea why. As he did so, his foot tapped against something else in the water, and he quickly fished his revolver out, putting it back in its holster. Gordon finished up loading and cocked the shotgun, looking up and watching as his enemy for the past two days died, wailing into the darkness around it.

The chamber shook, and the walls started to crumble. The green lights coming from the Nihilanth started to strobe, and Gordon shielded his eyes.

And then, suddenly, with one final green flash, Gordon was plunged into darkness. And, echoing in his mind, the Nihilanth's final words came to him.

" *You are a… man, he is not man… for you, he waits, for you…"*

Slowly, as though opening his eyes, the blackness faded back into light again. Standing before him, as clear as day, was the man in the suit. They were standing in some kind of alien elevator shaft, the platform below them curved like a hill. Circles of rock occasionally flashed up around them, giving Gordon the feeling they were going down. There were no walls to speak of. Just the open Xen sky, greens and blues merging together and forming a mist across one of several suns that were setting in the distance.

The man smiled, and took a loud breath.

"Gordon Freeman, in the flesh. Or rather, *in* the Hazard *Suit* ."

Gordon only then realised his shotgun was gone. Reaching down, he also found the revolver missing, along with all of the straps and belts he had brought with him to Xen.

His host tilted his head to the side almost imperceptibly. "I took the liberty of relieving you of your weapons." He smiled. "Most of them *were* government property. As for the suit… I think you've earned it."

His manner of speech was… wrong. That was the only way Gordon could describe it. Emphasis on the wrong words, gaps between words were there shouldn't be… and yet every word pronounced so exactly. It was disconcerting, to say the least.

With another green flash, Gordon suddenly found himself somewhere else, the man in the suit still stood before him. They were stood in a sandy pit that looked suspiciously like it was from Earth, although the sky spread out above them was anything but normal. Soldiers lay dead around them, scorched gun placements and tanks haphazardly thrown onto their sides, the acrid stench of

burning flesh occasionally wafting its' way to Gordon's nose on the wind.

His new companion continued as though nothing had happened. "The *bor* der world, Xen, is in our control, for the time be *ing* . Quite a *nas* ty piece of work you managed over there, I am im *pressed* ."

The smile of approval on his face made Gordon wish for a crowbar. Another green flash banished the thought from Gordon's mind. They stood on the ledge of an island, Xen sky surrounding them. From behind him, a bridge of rock extended up over their heads and across to another island far away from them, itself linking to another to create a grand web of glowing rocks. But these were different from those Gordon had become accustomed to leaping from.

These were beautiful.

In the distance, Gordon watched as non-descript shapes, looking like paper triangles in the wind, flapped about in synch, moving like a flock of birds through the swirling green sky. Gordon could only watch in amazement as the man continued beside him.

"That's why I'm here, Mr Freeman. I have *rec* ommended your *services* to my…" he seemed to stall on the next word, his voice croaking as he searched for the correct term. "… employers, and they have *auth* orised *me* to offer *you* a job."

A job? Frowning, Gordon looked over at him, questions on his lips. The man continued regardless, ignorant of his need to speak.

"They a *gree* with me that you *have* limitless…" He hissed the last syllable of the word as he again searched for the correct word. He smiled when he found the right one. "… potential."

Gordon took a breath to speak. But another green flash silenced them, and suddenly, Gordon found himself back in the place these two apocalyptic days had started. A tram from the Black Mesa transit system. Everything about it seemed so mundane now, so ordinary.

The faded paint of the disabled symbol on the floor, the warning to stay away from the door, the stuffing of the cushions bursting out of the seams… so long ago now. So boring. So… wonderful. But instead of the landscape of the Black Mesa facility slowly trudging past him, there was nothing. Just blackness, punctuated by the occasional thin streak of light, like a star whizzing past.

Unaware or uncaring of his nostalgia, the man continued quietly on.

"You've proved your *self* a decisive man, so I don't expect you'll have any trouble deciding what to do. If you're interested, *just* step into the portal and I will take *that*… as a *yes* . Otherwise, well…" He swallowed loudly, as though uncomfortable with the whole idea. His face, though, betrayed nothing. "… I can *offer* you a battle you have no *chance* of *win* ning… rather an anti-climax after what you've just survived."

His dead gaze remained on Gordon as the door behind him opened. In the doorway, fizzling and throbbing away in the void, a bright green portal waited for him, bathing them both in its' glow. Gordon looked from the man to the portal and then back again.

"Time to choose."

Gordon frowned. This wasn't something that could be rushed. Hell, he wouldn't even be able to decide if this was a *normal* job offer, never mind whatever the hell this was. And Gordon had questions. So many questions about… everything. Everything that had happened in the past two days, all the deaths and horror and suffering… he wanted his questions answering so that it wasn't all for nothing. For all he knew, everyone he ever cared about in that facility was gone. Killed by an alien, or soldier or just some freak accident. All because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time.

He opened his mouth to speak, but the man beat him to it.

"It's time to choose."

Gordon's mouth clamped shut. He could ask questions later. Now was the time for him to make a decision. Hell, he had been making life and death decisions for two days straight, a job offer should be no problem for the great and heroic Gordon Freeman. But this wasn't just some job offer. This was an opportunity for something that he had never thought possible. The worlds he had seen in just those brief glimpses… there was so much power behind those visions.

Power he could use to help those he had left behind on his travels. If he said no, they would die for certain. But if he said yes… he could have the chance to save them all.

Without one more glance at the pale, sunken face of the man beside him, Gordon walked straight into the portal. With a flash, he was encompassed in blackness.

As though still beside him, the man's voice hissed into his ear, sounding optimistic at his choice.

"Wisely *done*, Mr Freeman! I will *see* you up a *head* ."

Then, a noise akin to the air being pulled away from him made his ears pop, and the void truly surrounded him.

Gordon Freeman closed his eyes, and prepared for the future.

Epilogue

-1Disclaimer: I don't own *Half-Life.*

The Black Mesa Incident

Epilogue

The blackness surrounded him. Consumed him.

Seconds passed.

Then…

"Rise and shine, *Mis* ter Freeman… rise, and… *shine*…"

(A/N: That's all, folks. It's been very nearly two years, but I've finally finished this story after starting it on a rather flimsy whim. It's interesting for myself to see how my writing style has changed (hopefully for the better, be sure to let me know!).

I'd just like to thank everyone who took the time to read and review this story. You've managed to make this the most popular story I've written, and gave me the boosts I needed when I found my commitment flagging. But I'm sure none of you will object if I give a particular thank you to hhgbh for unfailing beta work, even though Half-Life was a universe completely unfamiliar to you. So many thanks to you, I could fill up a chapter with them.

Well, next stop, *Half-Life 2.* I'm hoping none of you will blame me for wanting to take a little break, but rest assured, you *will* be reading about Gordon's holiday in City 17 as soon as I can manage.

But, y'know, for the impatient among you, here's a little something from a story I'm tentatively calling 'City 17 - The Revolution':

Dizzy, breathless and bleeding, Gordon had to scrape his shoulder along the wall to pull himself to his feet and stumble into the corridor beyond. It led off to the left and the right, both ways blocked by closed doors. Gordon headed for the right first. Before he could even reach the handle, the door flew open, three CPs waiting for him. Gordon turned and limped to the other door, only for the same thing to happen there as well.

The CP in front of him sparked his baton alight and swung it at his head. Gordon ducked, but couldn't avoid the baton of the CP behind him, and it struck him in the side of the face, banging his head back against the wall. He saw the officers converging on him as he started to drift out of consciousness.

" *Over here!"*

Gordon's eyes flickered open upon hearing the charged female voice echo from somewhere behind the CPs. They looked around and charged towards someone at the left hand door.

" *No you don't!"*

As he drifted away, Gordon heard the CPs grunting as something solid seemed to hit them over and over again. Thumping and cracking noises were randomly interspersed, quickly followed by the grunts of the officers as they tumbled to the floors. The last thing he felt before he lost consciousness completely was a gentle grip on his shoulders.

When he opened his eyes, Gordon was staring up at the ceiling. He looked around hazily.

And then a face Gordon had never seen before drifted into view, knelt over him and smiled a wonderful smile.

" *Gordon Freeman, I presume."*

Hope that keeps your attention until the rest is ready. ;)

Read and review time, people! Thanks again.)